

# What Do Families Have to Say About Inclusion?

## How to Pay Attention and Get Results



Spencer J. Salend • Laurel M. Garrick Duhaney

I wanted my child to have the same experiences as other kids and to learn to live in the real world with its joys and frustrations, and the inclusion program has allowed her to do that. She has learned to be more independent, which will be helpful for preparation for later life. I don't believe that isolating her from other children is better for her or for classmates. I want my child to learn from other kids, and they can learn from her.

Family members have an important role to play in evaluating inclusion programs (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"). This article provides guidelines and strategies that educators can use to solicit feedback from students and their family members regarding their perceptions of their school's inclusion program. We also examine ways to address the concerns and issues raised by family members. Collecting information through interviews and surveys is a good first step.

### Use Interviews and Surveys

Inclusion teams can interview family members or ask them to complete a survey designed to identify their feelings about the inclusion program and their reactions to it. Interviews and surveys can ask a family to discuss their beliefs and concerns about inclusion and about the experiences and the perceptions of their children regarding the inclusive education placement. Teams can also use these instruments to query family members

about the effect of the inclusion program on their children, other students, themselves, other families, and educators (Davern, 1999). Interviews and surveys also can address family members' satisfaction with the following:

- Their roles in implementing inclusion.
- The educational program their child is receiving.
- Their communication with school personnel.
- The schoolwide and districtwide inclusive educational program policies and practices.

When using interviews and surveys, you should make sure that items and

directions are clearly stated in language that family members can understand. If you find it necessary to use "professional" terms, or jargon (e.g., inclusion), you should define these terms in language family members can understand. You also need to consider whether it is appropriate to use such terms as *students with disabilities* and *students without disabilities* and whether to tailor specific items for family members of students with and without disabilities.

You also can increase the value and relevance of information obtained from families by interacting with them in respectful and culturally sensitive ways that establish

### What Does the Literature Say About Family Feedback?

As comments like the ones cited in this article indicate, family members, like students and their teachers, have different views of and experiences with inclusion (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). These reactions can affect the important roles that family members perform in the implementation of successful inclusion programs (Gallagher et al., 2000; Gibb et al., 1997), and the establishment of meaningful and reciprocal family-school collaborations (Roberts, Rule, & Innocenti, 1998).

Educators should regularly gather feedback from families about inclusion programs, rather than assuming that they are pleased or displeased with these programs. Inclusion teams should also examine this feedback as part of an overall evaluation of inclusion programs, which also should include data from students and educators (Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, & Widaman, 1998; Salend, 2001).

Family members can be an excellent source of information concerning the effect of the inclusion program on the academic, social, and behavioral development of their children, as well as their children's feelings about being educated in inclusive classrooms. Inclusion teams can also solicit information from family members concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness of the school district's inclusion practices and policies, and their recommendations concerning policies and practices in need of revision (Giangreco, Edelman, Cloninger, & Dennis, 1993; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995).

a genuine basis for current and future partnerships and collaborations (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Reyes-Blanes, Correa, & Bailey, 1999). Dennis and Giangreco (1996) identified several respectful and culturally sensitive data-collection strategies, including the following:

- Learning about the family's cultural perspectives, literacy, and language background before collecting the data.
- Involving family members in developing the data-collection protocol and planning to collect data (e.g., determining the time, date, and location of the interview and who will be present).
- Adapting the protocol based on the family's interaction style.
- Examining the appropriateness of items.

Another important step in collecting information from families concerning

your inclusion program is to determine whether to use an *interview* or a *survey*. Surveys are easy for family members to complete because they usually require only *yes-no* choices, *true-false* answers, or choices of numbers on a scale from 1 to 5 (a Likert-type scale that involves the selection of a number that best indicates someone's feelings about various statements). Such surveys, however, provide only *quantitative* information. Figure 1 shows a sample inclusion survey for family members.

Although interviews can be time consuming to administer and analyze, they allow family members to offer in-depth statements, descriptions, recommendations, and examples that can be particularly useful in understanding their experiences and evaluating inclusive educational programs. You can

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***Interact with family members in respectful and culturally sensitive ways that establish a genuine basis for current and future partnerships and collaborations.***

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facilitate the interview process in the following ways:

- Being attentive.
- Establishing a comfortable and supportive atmosphere that fosters the comfort level and participation of family members.
- Asking open-ended, meaningful, and nonintrusive questions.

**Figure 1. Sample Family Inclusion Survey**

Please indicate your feelings about and experiences with inclusion using the following scale:

Strongly Disagree (SD) 1	Disagree (D) 2	Neutral (N) 3	Agree (A) 4	Strongly Agree (SA) 5	
1. I feel satisfied with the educational and supportive services my child is receiving.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I feel satisfied with the school's communication with families.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I feel that being in an inclusion class has been positive for my child.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel that inclusion helps children academically and socially.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I feel that families are adequately involved in the inclusion process.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel that the school district did a good job of explaining the inclusion program to me.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My child learned a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My child talks positively about school.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My child feels proud of his or her classwork.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My child has learned to feel comfortable interacting with other students.	1	2	3	4	5
11. My child has grown socially and emotionally.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My child's education has been negatively affected.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My child has received fewer services.	1	2	3	4	5
14. My child has made more friends.	1	2	3	4	5
15. My child has become more confident and outgoing.	1	2	3	4	5
16. My child has become more accepting of individual differences.	1	2	3	4	5
17. My child has "picked up" undesirable behavior from classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
18. My child has been teased by classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
19. My child has teased classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
20. My child would like to be in an inclusion class next year.	1	2	3	4	5

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## Figure 2. Sample Family Interview Questions Concerning Inclusive Education Programs

1. Do you think that placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their peers who do not have disabilities is a good idea? Why or why not?
2. What things do you like about your child being in an inclusion classroom?
3. What concerns do (did) you have about your child being in an inclusion classroom? Do you still have these concerns?
4. How does your child feel about being in an inclusion classroom? What things does your child like about being in an inclusion classroom? What concerns, if any, does your child have about being in an inclusion classroom? How could these concerns be addressed?
5. How do you feel about the educational program your child is receiving in his or her inclusion classroom?
6. How do you feel about the special education and supportive services your child is receiving in his or her inclusion classroom?
7. How has being in an inclusion classroom affected your child academically, socially, and behaviorally? Please describe any benefits or negative consequences you have observed in your child. What factors led to these changes?
8. How has your child's placement in an inclusion classroom affected other students? his or her teachers? other families? other professionals who work with your child? Please describe any benefits or any negative consequences for these individuals.
9. How has your child's placement in an inclusion classroom affected you? Please describe any benefits or any negative consequences for you.
10. What roles have you performed in the inclusion process? Are you satisfied with your role in the inclusion process? If so, what roles have been particularly important and satisfying? If not, why not and what roles would you like to perform?
11. What things seem to make inclusion work well at your child's school? What things seem to prevent inclusion from working well at your child's school? In what ways can inclusion be improved in your child's class and school?
12. What schoolwide and districtwide inclusion practices would you like to see retained? What practices would you like to see revised?
13. How is the communication system between you and the school working?
14. What additional information would you like to have about inclusion and your child's class?

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- Seeking clarification, details, and examples to support statements.
- Adapting questions according to the responses of family members.
- Audiotaping responses (Seidman, 1998).

Figure 2 presents a sample inclusion interview protocol for family members.

### Analyze the Data to Determine Program Strengths and Family Concerns

Once you have collected data from family members, members of the school or school district's inclusive educational program planning committee, which should include family members, can begin to analyze it to determine program strengths and family concerns. The data analysis can examine the following questions:

- What is the effect of the inclusion program on students' academic, social, and behavioral performance?
- How do family members feel about the inclusion program and their roles in the program?

- How is the communication system between families and school personnel working?
- What is the effect of the inclusion program on families?
- What components and practices of the inclusion program appear to be effective?
- What components and practices of the inclusion program are in need of revision?

You can analyze data from questionnaires using statistical measures. You can then examine ratings of individual items to assess aspects of the program that are successful, as well as those in need of revision.

The inclusion team can analyze interview data to determine the effect of the program on students and their families, as well as the strengths and weaknesses in the program from the perspective and experiences of family members. You should then share these strengths and weaknesses with family members to clarify, revise, and confirm the data

and to ensure that the interpretation of the findings are consistent with the experiences of family members (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

### Use the Data to Address Family Concerns

Following the data analysis, the committee can use the data to generate and implement solutions to address family concerns and to enhance student performance.

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*Share what you found about the program's strengths and weaknesses with family members to clarify, revise, and confirm the data and to ensure that the interpretation of the findings are consistent with the experiences of family members.*

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**Table 1. Possible Concerns of Family Members and Potential Solutions and Resources**

Possible Concerns	Potential Solutions and Resources
Family members are concerned about the effect of inclusion programs on their children's academic, social, and behavioral development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use assessment strategies to examine the effect of the program on students (Idol, Nevin, &amp; Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1999; Jochum, Curran &amp; Reetz, 1996)</li> <li>Meet regularly with families (Fialka &amp; Mikus, 1999)</li> <li>Employ effective instructional and classroom management strategies, such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and instructional technology (Salend, 2001)</li> </ul>
Family members have negative attitudes about inclusion programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the sources of these negative attitudes</li> <li>Provide family members with the opportunity to talk with family members and students who have experience with successful inclusion programs</li> <li>Provide families with information and research about inclusion programs (Garrick Duhaney &amp; Salend, 2000); Bennett, DeLuca, &amp; Bruns, 1997; Salend &amp; Duhaney, 1999; Waldron &amp; McLeskey, 1998)</li> </ul>
Family members have concerns regarding the quality of their involvement in the inclusion process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish and maintain family-professional partnerships (Roberts, Rule, &amp; Innocent, 1998)</li> <li>Ensure that family members participate in the development of their children's individualized education programs (IEPs) (Clark, S. G., 2000)</li> <li>Involve family members in planning and evaluating all aspects of the inclusion program</li> </ul>
Family members have noted their concerns regarding the availability of qualified personnel and the delivery of individualized and specialized services for their children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine whether these are valid concerns</li> <li>Identify educators' need for training</li> <li>Provide ongoing staff development activities</li> <li>Encourage educators to visit model inclusion programs</li> <li>Use strategies for implementing IEPs in inclusive settings, such as cooperative teaching (Thousand, Rosenberg, Bishop, &amp; Villa, 1997; Walther-Thomas, 1997)</li> </ul>
Family members are frustrated with the school's failure to provide inclusive programs for their children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine family-professional beliefs about labeling, placement, and inclusion (Bennett, DeLuca, &amp; Bruns, 1997; Soodak &amp; Erwin, 2000)</li> <li>Identify differences in cultural norms between families and professionals and assume a posture of culture reciprocity when collaborating with families (Kalyanpur &amp; Harry, 1999; Royes-Blanes, Correa, &amp; Bailey, 1999)</li> </ul>

Table 1 shows some potential concerns of family members regarding inclusive educational programs, as well as possible solutions and resources to address these concerns. For example, if family members feel that their children are targets of name calling or have few social interactions outside of school, the school can provide interventions to address these concerns, such as the following:

- Teaching students about individual differences (Denti & Meyers, 1997; Horne, 1998; Prater, 2000; Safran, 2000).

- Promoting friendships among students (Calloway, 1999; Froschl & Gropper, 1999).
- Teaching social skills to all students (Clark, D. M., & Smith, 1999).
- Encouraging all students to participate in extracurricular and community activities (Salend, 2001).

In addition, educators can collaborate with family members to support budding friendships, develop friendship goals and plans, and problem-solve ways to facilitate friendships and participation in after-school activities (Searcy, 1996; Wiener & Sunohara, 1998).

## Final Thoughts

As school districts continue to implement and evaluate inclusion programs, teams and committees need to obtain ongoing feedback from parents on these programs. Educators must establish reciprocal family-school partnerships. Any information on inclusive practices obtained from families (through surveys, interviews, or other means) can translate into quality inclusive practices and policies that address the needs of students and their families (see box, "What Family Members Say ...").

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**Spencer J. Salend** (CEC Chapter #615), Professor; and **Laurel M. Garrick Duhaney**, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Studies, State University of New York at New Paltz.

Address correspondence to Spencer J. Salend at Department of Educational Studies, State University of New York at New Paltz, 75 So. Manheim Blvd, New Paltz, NY 12561 (e-mail: [salends@newpaltz.edu](mailto:salends@newpaltz.edu)).

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### What Family Members Say . . .

"Inclusion has been an exhausting struggle for me. I ask for something for my child. It's denied by the school district, and I have to fight for it. Everything always seems to fall on me even if it should not be my responsibility. It's taking its toll on our family in terms of time, resources, and energy. I wish things could happen without me."

"I wanted him to have more interactions with other children his age. He has interacted with others in school during lunch, and on the playground as a result of the inclusion program. However, it has not extended to after-school activities. He has not been invited to parties or to play with others."

"I am pleased with my child's inclusion teachers, and so is he. They are caring and sensitive to his personality and learning style and allow him to learn at his own pace."

"I'm all for having a variety of students in the class, but won't these students take time away from the other kids, and slow things down? We don't have enough money in the district to implement it. Classes are too big as is, and the teachers are not trained to teach those students. And the regular students will make fun of the special education students."

"While I initially had some reservations, I like my child being in an inclusion classroom. She is happier, is more confident, and has new and different friends. I also feel she's learning new things and getting a better education."

"While I didn't know much about the inclusion program when I was notified that my child would be in it, it has had a positive impact on my child. He has grown academically and has become more sensitive to others. I am very pleased and hope that he will be in a similar program next year."

"My child has done well in the special education class. He receives special attention from a trained teacher who understands his needs, and I don't have to worry about other kids making fun of him. Some students can be included, but many of our students need special attention and individualized instruction, which only special education teachers can provide."