

Learning Together Disability inclusion in education

Family-professional partnerships: Why they are needed for inclusive education to work in South Africa



FACTSHEET

About TEDI

The Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI) project aims to empower teachers to provide quality education for learners with severe to profound sensory and developmental disabilities (SPSDD) through training that is focused on inclusivity, diversity, and addressing learners' impairment-specific needs.

Acronyms

HEI	Higher education institute
ITE	Initial teacher education
SPSDD	Severe to profound sensory and developmental disabilities. These are physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities that are severe and often require high levels of support

What are family-professional partnerships?

Family-professional partnerships refer to the collaborative relationships between families of children with disabilities and professionals who are involved in supporting these children.

While often referred to as parent-professional relationships, in South Africa, we prefer the term family-professional partnerships as this acknowledges that the whole family may be involved and that children with severe to profound sensory or developmental disabilities (SPSDD) may come from many different family structures.

Often children's teachers are seen as the only professional partners with whom families may share a professional and collaborative relationship to support quality education of learners with SPSDD. However, any professional who provides a direct or indirect service to the child or to the child's family, or is involved in policies affecting the child, can be a part of a collaborative partnership, e.g. carers, therapists, policymakers etc.

The important idea is that by working together, all members of a child's support team can link knowledge and abilities across contexts and disciplines to best support children with SPSDD. Each family member and professional brings different insights, expertise and experience to maximise learners' development and learning processes.



Why are family-professional partnerships important?

Research shows the importance of good family-professional partnerships in improving the academic performance of children with SPSDD and their attitude towards learning, as well as their families' quality of life. Collaboration between families, teachers and other professionals also has the following benefits:

- As families become more involved with their child's learning and daily activities, family members become more sensitive to their child's learning and care needs. Families then grow in confidence and share a common purpose to support their child.
- Teachers and professionals gain a holistic perspective and understanding of a child's home environment including insights into the family's cultural and social life, access and availability of resources in their specific context, and other factors that could influence the child's development. Knowing these factors empowers teachers and professionals to come up with appropriate, proactive and beneficial learning solutions.
- Schools that encourage and practise healthy family-professional partnerships become centres of care and resources for other organisations in communities, and in turn are viewed by community members as empathetic and truly supportive. The integration of children with SPSDD and their families into wider communities is ultimately the long-term result.
- Family-professional partnerships create a sense of community and shared purpose among role-players supporting the learning of children with SPSDD. This can become a platform for advocacy and lobbying to make the educational rights of learners with SPSDD known to policymakers and decision-makers. This can play an important part in the process of advancing and enacting a legal and policy framework for inclusive education in South Africa.
- Family-professional partnerships can enable innovation of educational practices that are sustainable as well as transformative. Rigid special education approaches and goal setting that rely on the expertise of professionals alone may cause tensions between families and professionals because of perceived lack of progress. Collaboration can address this as families and professionals develop learning and teaching strategies together in support of mutually-agreed goals.
- The morale of professionals and family members improves when there are partnerships between these parties.

What are some of the constraints in building effective family-professional partnerships in South Africa's education system?

For family-professional partnerships to be successful, it is important that partners understand the context in which such relationships exist. There are still many obstacles to the implementation of an inclusive education system for South Africa, such as that outlined in Education White Paper 6. Frustration with this lack of progress can lead to misunderstandings between families and teachers, making collaboration difficult. This means that there is often a shift of responsibility between partners, and they blame each other when there is a lack of progress in learners' academic development. Some contextual factors that professionals and family members should be aware of – in order to be informed and proactive partners in including and empowering learners with SPSDD – are as follows:

Professionals

- Many teachers, including those in full-service and special schools, have not been adequately trained in how to facilitate the learning of children with SPSDD. These teachers often feel overwhelmed, ill-equipped and unsupported to meet the needs of learners and their families. In TEDI research, teachers expressed many needs for support, some of which are:
 - Training and support in how to adapt curriculum content and their physical environments to meet the diverse educational needs of learners with SPSDD.
 - Assistance with the adaptation of learning and teaching support material.
 - Increased access to appropriate infrastructure, technology, assistive devices and support in the use thereof.
 - Support in learning Braille and how to use specific methodologies in D/deaf education and learning South African Sign Language.
 - Increased parental involvement in the learning process.

- The majority of student teachers completing a formal, initial teacher education qualification will not be properly equipped with the skills to teach learners with disabilities, and therefore the upskilling of teachers in these areas relies on individual teachers taking responsibility to find learning opportunities after qualifying. This is challenging for most teachers in all contexts.
- Additionally, according to policy regulating teacher education, teachers-in-training are not required to complete compulsory practical teaching practice in full-service or special schools. This means that student teachers qualify without gaining any practical experience working with learners with SPSDD.
- Many professionals have prejudicial attitudes towards certain family members which affect their relationships. For example, teachers might consider fathers as patriarchal and uncaring, and mothers as nurturing and loving, and these perceptions affect the involvement of such family members at the school.

Families

- Many families have been sent from pillar to post to get their child into school. Many ordinary schools will not consider admitting a child with a disability and, when they do, they often make it the family's responsibility to get extra support for the child.
- When family members are referred to special schools, it can be a long and difficult process to gain admission. This means that when their child is eventually placed in school, they may be worried that his or her place is not secure.
- When children are sent to hostel facilities far away from the family home, this places a financial burden on the family and they may not be able to visit and keep in touch with their child as much as they would like to.
- Some employers refuse to give family members such as fathers time to attend to their children at school, believing that such duties belong with the mother.
- Many family members prioritise providing for the financial needs of the family rather than direct involvement with the child's education. In such instances, leaving work to attend meetings with professionals at the school could mean some loss of income to the family.
- Some family members resist being involved at the school when they do not see the benefit of the interventions offered. Such family members might perceive the school to be limiting their power to shape the future of their children.
- Stigma leads many family members to fear being associated with their children with SPSDD. They then avoid being seen in public places such as schools for children with SPDD in order to protect statuses.

What can you do to develop and support family-professional relationships?

As a professional who partners with families of learners with SPSDD, you should consider doing the following to enhance these relationships:

- Communicate regularly about a child's development and progress to families, bringing challenges to their attention quickly and sensitively. Families often avoid such discussions for fear they will be asked to take their child out of the school. Before they can engage honestly and constructively, they need to be reassured that their child's place is secure.
- Be mindful of the constraints on families' ability to contribute to the learning and support process, due to time, distance or language issues, and adjust your expectations and communication modes to best suit the needs of particular families.
- Explore strategies to improve the livelihood of needy families of children with SPSDD.
- Draw up a contract with family members to outline how professionals and families will share responsibilities in the education of learners with SPSDD.
- Offer training to family members on the importance of professional-family partnerships.
- Involve family members in the development of training for professionals to enhance the effectiveness of the training.
- Look out for sponsorships and connect them with families who need support for the education of the child with SPSDD.
- Be aware of the cultural values and contexts of different families and do not judge "ways of being" that are unfamiliar to you.
- Recommend enrolling the child with SPSDD in neighbourhood schools whenever possible in order to address distance challenges that could affect partnerships between professionals and families.
- Be mindful of your own prejudices, such as those tied to gender and level of education, when engaging family members. Be proactive.
- Be aware of the power relations that are skewed towards you as the professional in the partnership with families and strive to be democratic, recognising family members as experts regarding their child with SPSDD.
- Strive for consensus with family members in the drawing up of plans and decision-making about the child.
- Collaborate with families to come up with learning goals for the child that take into account the contextual realities of families rather than adopting prescriptive interventions.
- Show genuine interest, empathy and care for the well-being of children and their families and communicate this verbally and non-verbally.
- Give family members opportunities to identify their family needs rather than only the needs of the child with SPSDD, in recognition of the African spirit of "I am because we are".
- Adapt your meetings to the contextual realities of the families, such as cultural and gender dynamics. For instance, consider the best time to hold meetings following the job demands of family members. Additionally, while one of the parents might appreciate lengthy meetings, the other might be inclined towards practical engagements, such as solution-focused meetings.
- Listen to parents' concerns and observations, weighing them up carefully so that trust is built.
- Treat each child and their families as individuals with specific needs, but also facilitate contact between families in the form of support groups. Families can learn from each other and it helps for them to share their challenges and the strategies they use to address them.
- Think of and implement creative ways to address stigma that family members might have towards disability. For example, they might find it helpful to meet with an adult with the same disability who is successful and empowered.
- Attend training to upskill yourself in the education of learners with SPSDD and in fostering professional-family partnerships.

- Advocate for the educational rights of children with SPSDD in all educational contexts at a school, district, provincial and national level so that some of the challenges listed here are addressed by policy-makers and decision-makers.

To be a family member who partners with professionals in the education system meaningfully and constructively, you should consider doing the following:

- Understand the challenges teachers face in teaching learners with SPSDD as discussed here and work together to find solutions and alternatives to overcome them. Suggestions to help do this are as follows:
 - Attend parent-teacher meetings regularly and tell the teacher if and why you are unable to meet.
 - When relevant, tell teachers and other partners about any family or personal issues that make it difficult for you to meet or to support your child's learning e.g. financial problems, working long or odd hours, conflict in the home, your own level of education etc.
 - Communicate with each other in ways that are most suitable, whether that be face-to-face, via WhatsApp, phone, email etc.
- Tell professionals what particular support you would like from them. Be honest, clear and respectful about the type of help you need.
- Listen carefully to the questions, recommendations and advice provided by professional partners in order to respond with the best information and attitude, and ask questions to check your understanding and the understanding of your partners.
- Volunteer at your child's school or learning centre (e.g. reading to learners, administrative assistance, transporting learners etc.) and get involved in committee and other leadership positions so that you become part of wider decision-making processes.
- Attend training on professional-family partnerships if possible and suggest ways to enhance the education of learners with SPSDD as necessary.

- Encourage other parents and family members to become involved in school activities and support other parents in their journey of supporting their children.
- Be an active member of family support groups and if these do not exist then speak to the schools about whether they could assist you in setting up such a group.

“Parents are more willing to hold hands if you listen to them and show respect in regard to their children. It was also important to show them that I value their opinions and we should work together to get positive outcomes.”

Feedback from an educator after completing the TEDI SPID: Circles of Care course

References and further reading

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“The committed professional thinks of his or her job as a calling ‘I’m not just a therapist; I’m an advocate for persons with developmental disabilities’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Extract from *Exceptional Children – Dimensions of Family and Professional Partnerships: Constructive Guidelines for Collaboration*

Further information

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for more information on TEDI short courses and research projects aimed at empowering teachers with the knowledge and skills required to facilitate quality teaching and learning of learners with special and impairment-specific needs.

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