

Chapter One



The Dance Toward Partnership

Using the Dance Metaphor to Understand Parent–Professional Partnerships

Forming partnerships between parents of children with disabilities and the professionals who work with them is like learning a new dance. At first, the parent dancer and the professional dancer do not glide together gracefully across the floor. Their moves are likely to feel stiff, uncertain, and awkward. The partners may have different expectations, needs, and constraints. Each seems to be listening to his or her own music, with its own tune, words, and rhythm: there's the child's song, the mother's song, the father's song, the teacher's song, the special educator's song, the administrator's song, the therapist's song, the physician's song—no shortage of music! No wonder some partnerships are not as graceful as others; the absence of shared music and familiar dance steps causes collisions. Toes—and feelings—get stepped on (Fialka, 2001).

Forming effective partnerships between parents and professionals requires that partners take time to listen to their own song and each other's song. This kind of listening has the potential to open the

partners to a fresh approach and a broader perspective on what the child needs. As parents and professionals share their insights, worries, dreams, and suggestions with each other, a new song—a new plan—is created, one that contains the contributions of many voices. This new plan weaves together several perspectives. It’s no longer just “your” swing dance or “my” salsa. It’s an original musical score with new choreography based on the unique needs and gifts of each child.

No one person can “dance the dance” or create the best program for and with the child. The best plans are built upon the insights, perspectives, and expertise of both parents and professionals, eventually with the full participation of the child as she or he grows. It takes teamwork—and a complex choreography in which the synergy of the dancers creates the most comprehensive and effective supports and interventions for the child.

This dance of partnership, easy to describe on paper, is far from easy to achieve in reality. Partners will not always be graceful, and few get it right on the first tries. Master dancers achieve success through practice and skilled coaching. The performers on *Dancing With the Stars* do not spin, twirl, and whisk each other across the floor on the first take. They practice, persist, and listen to each other as well as their coaches. They bump into each other with impatience and frustration. They worry about how they might be judged by the onlookers. Eventually, if they are going to make it to the finals, they learn to trust each other and to share the same rhythm—or at least complement each other’s unique rhythms. Ultimately, theirs is a dance that awes and inspires audiences.

The dance image can be useful to parents and professionals in guiding their understanding of partnerships formed on behalf of children.

To sit at the conference table together and discuss the child with disabilities is an essential beginning, but it does not automatically result in a genuine partnership. We may look like partners but not *be* partners—yet!

The best dance results from a strong, ongoing commitment by all partners to listen to each other’s music, try out each other’s dance steps, and trust that a new dance will be created, one that integrates the most creative contributions of each partner.

At the forefront of this work, we must remember that parents and professionals must set aside their egos and work together on behalf of the child. The reward for a well-performed dance of partnership comes from knowing that the child has been given the support needed to reach his or her fullest potential—rooted in the highest of expectations. That accomplishment—the evolving and ultimate ability of the child to dance his or her unique dance—is sweet music to everyone’s ears!

HOW THE DANCE BEGINS

There is no escaping it these days. Partnership is a recurrent buzzword in the fields of education, health, and human services. “We must be partners. Collaboration is the name of the game.” This is the message of administrators, policy makers, professionals, and parents. Articles, posters, and textbooks echo this refrain.

Partnership is indeed a worthy cause, one that appears easy to believe in and own. However, effective partnerships can be elusive, hard to grasp. “So—is this a partnership?” “What’s it supposed to look like?” “Why is it so hard?”

After reading and thinking about parent-professional partnerships for several years, we realized that the frustration sometimes felt by parents and professionals is often due to misunderstandings about the nature and evolution of partnerships. For example, there is often the expectation that parents and professionals become partners the moment they sit down at a conference table to discuss plans and goals for a child. Our experience has been just the opposite: Partnerships evolve over time and go through a series of developmental phases during the course of working together. It is our intent to

describe the phases parents and professionals cycle through as they form and maintain effective partnerships.

It Takes Time

Before we explore parent-professional partnerships using this developmental model, it is important to understand the social-cultural context in which these relationships exist. We live in a society seduced by immediate gratification—a fast-food mentality. What began with instant burgers and instant coffee now includes instant messaging, instant banking, instant information—all of which feed our expectation that things can (and should) happen *now. Right away! This second or sooner!*

But not all processes can be shortened and accelerated. There is virtually no way around the fact that relationships take time. They develop through conversations, problem-solving, listening, and overall hard work—all fundamental to creating trust. There is, in fact, no magic for speeding up the process of forming a solid working partnership.

Nor can we expect smooth sailing and effortless perfection along the way. Instead, we must realize that we will have to work slowly and carefully to become true partners; that we will make mistakes and experience setbacks; that we will learn to make repairs; and that we will need large reserves of patience, forgiveness, hope, and trust in order to forge effective and durable relationships that benefit our children.

We believe that a developmental approach to partnerships is both realistic and useful. Such an approach suggests to us that there are identifiable phases with tasks that must be completed before partners are able to move to the next level. This way of thinking helps us to view challenges and struggles in our relationships as normal and inevitable, rather than as hopeless indicators of a doomed relationship.

Frustrating or challenging as these interactions may be, they can be understood as a “typical” part of the process of working together. Being out of sync sometimes *is* part of the dance. In the words of the visionary author Margaret Wheatley (2009), “We expect it to be messy at times.”

Do I Wanna Dance?

As we hope you can see, the dance metaphor is a particularly useful one for understanding partnership. However, even before two people get on the dance floor together, a litany of questions emerges—questions that float, invisible and unspoken, in search of answers that don’t come easily or quickly. Therefore, it is important to contemplate these unexpressed preliminary questions, because they capture the anxiety and hesitancy that naturally frame the dance toward partnership.

The first question often asked is, “Do I even want to be at this meeting, at this dance?” For parents in particular, the partnership with professionals is not a chosen relationship. Most parents did not plan to be involved in special education or special services, so although parents might need the support, guidance, or knowledge of the professionals, they often feel hesitant about stepping into this new and unsought relationship. Thus at the outset, the partnership is a dance of ambivalence: “I need you in my life, but I don’t always want you in my life.”

Professionals, on the other hand, typically feel eager to share their expertise, resources, and skills. “Let’s begin this dance. I am ready! I have much to share with you.”

When their enthusiasm is met with hesitation, folded arms, or other signs of parental disengagement, professionals may feel frustrated, even hurt. Quietly they may be thinking, “I’m only trying to be helpful!”

My Reflection: What can be done or said to ease this awkwardness, ambivalence, or initial uncertainty?

Seasoned professionals offer the following advice when encountering a hesitant parent: “Don’t take it personally! In most situations, the reluctance to connect is not about you, the professional, but rather about the life-changing circumstances forced onto the family. It’s important to remember that most parents didn’t choose to be at this dance.”

With time and support, families move onto the dance floor having choreographed their own dance based on their family’s values, preferences, and strengths—based on *their* music! Families grow, adjust, and thrive in their own ways and in their own time. It is up to the professionals to get to know each family and to honor each family’s unique ways of coping, shaping their lives and supporting their children.

Professionals, too, may experience elements of an unchosen quality to their dance. Most professionals chose to work with children and rightly feel that their primary partner is the child. Yet professionals soon learn that along with the child comes another set of partners—the parents, who bring another set of important issues, expectations, and desires. Moreover, in many situations, professionals, early in their careers, may have limited training, experience, and guidance working with families. Having the parents as part of the team comes as a challenge, sometimes even as a surprise. Professionals may ponder, “Wait . . . you mean I have to dance with *you* too! How do I do that? What do I know about *your* music?”

Increasingly, because of the mounting expectations to “do more, with less,” providers are feeling the squeeze of too many partners on the dance floor. Nowadays, it is common to hear providers whisper behind closed doors, “I love my work, but I don’t know how I am going to handle so many children, families, forms, requirements, and meetings.”

Thus both parents and professionals often begin this working alliance with a certain reluctance or ambivalence—not an easy way to begin.

In addition to asking “do I wanna dance?” other common questions may linger back stage.

- What if I am ready to dance hard and fast when you want a slow, gentle dance?
- If I follow your lead, where will you take me? Will you follow my lead?
- What if we collide, trip, or fall? Will we be able to pick ourselves up and continue dancing?
- Can I set aside my experiences with previous partnerships and truly begin this new one with a clean sheet of music?
- And for those who have already been dancing strenuously on behalf of their children or students, a quiet question, born of exhaustion: How much energy do I have to begin another partnership?

These are basic but important questions. Ignoring them can complicate the partnership process; being sensitive and open to them can heighten the possibility of a rich beginning.

PHASES OF THE PARTNERSHIP DANCE

A Cautious Beginning to the Dance

When parents meet with professionals for the first time, they are likely to feel out of place. Everything is unfamiliar: the faces, the titles, the little chairs, the language, the forms, the procedures ... the overall experience.

My Recollection: If I remember only one thing from my reading about the parent-professional partnership and the dance metaphor, it is

Even veteran special education teachers who unexpectedly become parents of a child with a disability will attest to how awkward they feel at their first meeting as a parent. Despite their years of knowledge and expertise, they report a strong sense of vulnerability and even helplessness.

Professionals, too, may feel uncomfortable encountering parents for the first time. What will this family be like? Easy to engage? Reluctant? Quiet? Withdrawn? Trusting? Emotional? Hard to read?

In many ways, this initial meeting is like a middle school dance. There is self-consciousness, uncertainty, and an absence of trust. Like young teens at their first dance, potential partners eye each other cautiously, wondering who should make the first move.

My Reflection: What can professionals and parents do and say to acknowledge and ease some of the awkwardness of these initial meetings?