

# ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

## *Partnerships*

Nelson, L. G. L., Summers, J.A., & Turnbull, A. P. (2004). Boundaries in family-professional relationships: Implications for special education. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*, 153-165.

### BOTTOM LINE

The field of special education lacks guidelines about the boundaries of relationships between educators and parents. This means there is no clear agreement about when, where, and how educators could or should interact with parents outside the strict hours and purposes of school or early intervention programs. In this study, investigators analyzed comments of parents and practitioners to learn their preferences for boundaries. They found that parents appreciated professionals who were (a) available and accessible beyond the specific hours and locations of their job, (b) willing to take on responsibilities that might appear to be beyond the strict definition of their job tasks, and (c) able to act as a friend or “like family” in relating to them or their child. Professionals for the most part agreed with these perspectives, but expressed some reservations about practical and emotional realities that get in the way of their being able to respond the way many parents would like.

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## TIPS

- As a professional, meet with other staff in your school or program and think about guidelines for boundaries in parent-professional relationships that your agency can support. Consider having a committee made up of both parents and professionals to produce the guidelines.
- As a parent, think about your own preferences for how much, how often, and where you want to have interactions with the professionals serving your child. Be clear about what is too much and what is not enough.
- As a professional, have open dialogues with parents about their needs. Share your own limitations (e.g., young children who must be picked up from child care).
- Consider working within your professional organization to establish ethical guidelines for working with parents and students with disabilities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The participants in this qualitative study described three dimensions of boundaries: (a) availability and accessibility (time and place), (b) breadth of responsibility (defining one's job narrowly or broadly with respect to the child or family), and (c) dual relationships (going beyond a parent-professional role to friendship).
- Most parents in this study said they wanted professionals who were available and accessible at different times and places outside strict working hours – to them it suggested not only greater flexibility, but also that the professional really cared about them as individuals.
- Most parents also said they appreciated professionals who did not define their job narrowly and were willing to take some action that might be considered “above and beyond” their usual responsibilities. Examples were helping a parent find resources or providing transportation.
- Many parents also believed their most rewarding partnerships with professionals were those that evolved beyond professional boundaries. A professional they considered to be “like family” was a person they could trust to act with their child the way they would themselves.
- Professionals were for the most part in agreement with parents about both availability and breath of responsibility in that they agreed this kind of flexibility was important

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for them to do a good job. Some professionals did, however, acknowledge some of the barriers and conflicts with administrative structures and personal lives.

- Fewer professionals were willing to take on the dual relationships parents seemed to want, in part because they worried about the appropriateness of becoming friends with parents, and in part because of the emotional toll of becoming involved with families.

## METHOD

- The researchers conducted a total of 34 focus groups with 107 participants, in three states. Separate focus groups were conducted for families with and without children with disabilities, high and middle income families, practitioners, and administrators. In addition, the researchers conducted 33 individual interviews with non-English speaking parents and their providers.
- The participants were asked to discuss the characteristics of both successful and challenging partnerships between families and professionals.
- Transcripts were coded to identify specific characteristics of successful partnerships.
- For this study, categories related to boundaries were identified and those sections of transcripts were re-analyzed to develop a greater understanding of the participants' perspectives about boundaries.

## NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCHERS

- Develop and test ethical guidelines about appropriate boundaries between families and professionals in special education and early intervention programs.
- Conduct a more focused and larger study exploring preferences for accessibility, breadth of responsibility, and dual relationships among both professionals and family members. Investigate differences of parent preferences by age and severity of the child's disability.
- Explore potential supports for professionals to enable them to maintain healthy well-being in the face of the additional emotional and physical requirements implied by these expanded role boundaries.

## RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J.A., Frankland, C., Nelson, L.G.L., and Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of parent-professional partnerships. *Exceptional Children*, 70, 167-184.

Summers, J.A., Hoffman, L., Marquis, J., Turnbull, A., Poston, D., & Nelson, L. (2005).  
Measuring the quality of family-professional partnerships in special education services.  
*Exceptional Children*, 72(1), 65-81.

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