



Navigating Intra-Family Conflict

A Resource for Early Intervention Service Providers

The importance of early intervention services (EIS) in improving outcomes for children with developmental delays or disabilities is well-established, as is the impact on the child's development of having stable, supporting, safe and responsive adults. While conflict is a normal and natural part of healthy relationships, prolonged conflict between parents can be harmful to a child. This resource offers strategies and sample language EIS providers can use and adapt to fit their context as they navigate intra-family conflicts.

Introduction

Amelia and Marco are twins, currently 22 months of age, referred to early intervention by their pediatrician. The twins' eligibility evaluation identified each child with moderate developmental delays in all areas. The mother prioritized social and emotional challenges. Their parents have no other children and share parenting. The twins sleep at their mother's home most of the time. Tensions mount whenever the parents are together, often resulting in each parent blaming the other. In addition to their relationship conflicts, the parents disagree about a diagnosis placing Amelia on the autism spectrum. During a visit from the early intervention service (EIS) provider, an argument between the parents ended with the parents shouting at each other, both children crying, and the EIS provider leaving the mother's home in response to the argument.

Jack, a 13-month-old boy with a diagnosis of Down syndrome, receives early intervention services twice a week at home with his mother. His biological father wants to be present when services are provided but Jack's mother has an order of protection in place, preventing Jack's father from coming into close contact with her. The order of protection does not include Jack. Jack's father has parental rights and is demanding half of the early intervention services are provided in his home. Jack's mom disagrees with this change. Both parents continue to share negative stories about the other parent with the EIS provider. The EIS provider doesn't know who to believe or how to continue to provide services.



The importance of early intervention services (EIS) in improving outcomes for children with developmental delays or disabilities is well-established, as is the impact on the child's development of having stable, supporting, safe and responsive adults. While conflict is a normal and natural part of healthy relationships, prolonged conflict between parents can be harmful to a child. Moreover, when parents disagree about the nature of the early intervention services to be provided, creating an effective individualized family service plan (IFSP) and meeting the outcomes in the IFSP could be in jeopardy.

As an EIS provider you can feel caught in the middle of parents who are in conflict about what each believe is the appropriate course of action for their child. While this conflict may be uncomfortable, there are strategies that will help you maintain your neutrality and encourage parents to work toward their child's best interests. We hope the tips and tools provided in this resource will strengthen your ability to keep the focus on the child and increase parents' capacity to meet their child's needs.

An Important Reminder

Particularly when there is intra-family conflict present, doing due diligence is critical to make sure you are confident that the family members involved have parental rights under IDEA. You may want to speak to your administrator if you have questions.



Establish Your Role

As the EIS provider, some family members may see you as having the authority to resolve conflicts or may try to convince you of the merits of their point of view. However, the EIS provider's role precludes you from making decisions for families, and instead calls you to participate in the ongoing assessment of the child, provide early intervention services in accordance with the IFSP, and support families through consultation and training within the scope of the early intervention services you provide. By clearly communicating your role and how parents will have an opportunity to participate, families will know what to expect from you as a provider.

Establishing a clear understanding of the EIS provider's role from the very beginning can assist in successfully navigating intra-family conflict that may interfere with delivering services.

Consider the following sample language for establishing your role:

- "I recognize that there is a difference of opinion on this matter. I can share what the results tell us about Amelia's progress."
- "My role is to support your family by offering practices, sharing information, and providing resources to aid in Marco's communication with you."
- "It is important to let me know when any changes are made to the visitation schedule that will impact the provision of services."
- "Although services are taking place at mom's house, perhaps we can livestream sessions or share demonstration videos and service notes with both of you."
- "I will be certain to share all information with each of you. Do I have the correct contact information for you both?"

Set Clear Boundaries

EIS providers engage with families at critical times in children's lives. Empathy builds connections vital to effectively meet the needs of the families you serve. Equally important is setting clear boundaries when working with families, particularly when they experience intra-family conflict. Boundaries help you act on empathy and respond to families appropriately rather than being reactive in the conflict or feeling pressure to choose a side.

You may have opinions when parents are in conflict with each other. However, inserting an opinion on their personal lives may inadvertently derail the ability for the parents to work together, or create a barrier between you and one of the parents. Finding a way to support the child while not taking sides in intra-family conflict is critical.

Consider these examples of language to communicate or reinforce your boundaries and neutrality with families:

- "I appreciate that you are experiencing a lot right now. I'm here to support you and listen to how you see Marco's needs and what has and hasn't helped him."
- "I'm here to help us all explore the various options and resources that are brought to the table. While it might be easier if I could just make the decision, fortunately we have all of our expertise to consider as we decide how to support Marco."
- "I recognize this is a difficult time between the two of you and there are a lot of decisions you need to work through. Right now, I can help with Amelia's behavior during feeding."
- "How fortunate the children have parents who care so much about them and are so involved. I can help us explore what you're each seeing and identify several additional strategies for managing Amelia's outbursts."
- "I'm not in the position to make a decision on this. I can help you find some alternative solutions that may address both of your concerns."

Prepare Parents for IFSP Meetings

When IFSP members take proactive measures to prevent and address conflicts as they arise, the IFSP is more likely to meet the infant or toddler's needs and result in positive outcomes.

Below are some strategies that EIS providers can take to minimize tension during the meeting when parents are in conflict with each other.

Discuss hopes, concerns, and fears with each parent prior to the meeting. Review strategies with each parent for minimizing tension during meetings, such as:

- bringing someone to support them at the meeting;
- attending family mediation prior to IFSP meeting;
- if available, requesting the meeting be facilitated by a 3rd party neutral;
- participating virtually;
- writing down and organizing thoughts, concerns, and proposed solutions prior to the meeting; or
- developing a plan for how you will participate in the meeting, manage conflict, and cope with intense emotions.



Reframe Demands and Criticisms as Options and Considerations

Reframing demands as options is one method of shifting a conversation to more neutral ground and moving conflict into problem solving. Furthermore, reframing a demand as “something to be considered” opens opportunities for continued problem solving.

Sometimes people are critical of a plan before fully considering it. Providing opportunities to explore options and weigh concerns can move the process forward. Instead, you can frame points of contention or positions in neutral terms, such as the services, data, or progress, instead of one family member's position.

Some possible language:

- “Your suggestion is certainly one for us to consider in terms of curtailing Amelia's biting. Let's come up with several more to explore and then decide on how to proceed.”
- “That's a good question and it looks like we might need more information before we make a decision about Marco's services.”
- “You have concerns about Jack's progress so far. Let's focus on his eating protocols and see if we can identify possible improvements to the plan.”
- “I see you have concerns about that approach. Are there changes that could be made to address your point?”
- “Mom, you're thinking moving the speech therapy earlier in the day would work best for Jack, and Dad, you're looking at the morning time as time for the kids to have social time. Are there any other options to consider before we decide?”
- “We've discussed two options so far. Let's come up with at least two more and then we'll explore how they'd each work.”



Take a Coaching Approach

A coaching approach encourages families to be active in resolving their concerns to meet their needs and offers you the opportunity to be supportive without becoming directive. The goals of coaching include assisting families in defining their needs and identifying supports to meet those needs. For example, possible supports to assist with co-parenting or intra-family conflict could include respite care, individual or family counseling, or support from friends and family members. Resources to work through intra-family conflict could include mediation centers, family support groups, cultural or religious organizations, and much more. Having knowledge of local and state services available to support families will allow you to assist families who need more resources than what your services can provide.

Below are some sample responses:

- “Based on what you’ve shared, it sounds like this situation has been very difficult for you. Do you have any family members who may be able to support you with co-parenting?”
- “Have you considered mediation to resolve this issue?”
- “It seems like this situation has become more difficult. Do you have someone you can talk to about it?”
- “It sounds like you’d like to hear how other people navigate co-parenting issues. Would you be interested in trying out a support group?”
- “Would you be interested in information about community resources that could help with that concern?”
- “Based on the information you’ve given you might consider pursuing family mediation before the next IFSP meeting.”
- “I want to be supportive, but I think you would benefit from talking with someone else. I’m curious who you think might best be able to help you with that.”

De-escalate High Emotions

Even if you are not a party to a conflict, being in a situation where others are in conflict can be stressful. Maintaining a calm demeanor, and projecting control and professionalism are important when others may be expressing heightened emotions. Taking breaks can support physical and emotional safety. Taking deep breaths, mentally counting to 10, or employing other stress management strategies to reduce tension may be helpful for your own emotional health in tense situations.

Personality, experiences, background, and culture all affect how people express emotions. Individuals experiencing stress can have difficulty coping with strong emotions, but they are often important signals that can help identify threats, signify what is important, and alert people to when more information or support is needed. Unfortunately, strong emotions can also interfere with successful working relationships.

Some strategies for working through strong emotions include:

Interrupting respectfully to redirect the tone or content:

- "Perhaps we can take a pause and slow the conversation down."
- "I am having a hard time supporting you both when things escalate to this level."
- "It might be helpful to return the focus to the reason for this meeting."

Validate emotions and concerns:

- "This sounds like such a difficult situation for you both."
- "I'm so sorry that these meetings seem to bring up difficult emotions for you."
- "It must be hard to care so much for your child despite disagreeing as parents."
- "You both care deeply for your children and are working hard to advocate for their needs."

Provide alternatives for resolving the dispute in the present:

- "It seems we are not moving forward on this point. Could we move to another topic and possibly set this one aside for the time being?"
- "We may not come to agreement on this issue. How should we then proceed?"



Keep Safety in Mind

Your safety and others' safety are of primary concern. If de-escalation techniques are unsuccessful, or you believe the environment has become unsafe, end the meeting.

Suggestions for how to end a meeting include:

- "We seem to be at a point where we are not moving forward. I suggest we table this discussion and plan to revisit it when we have additional information."
- "I'm uncomfortable with continuing this meeting. At this point, I need to end this conversation and will share next steps with you by email when I get back to my office."
- "Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this issue. We've certainly covered a lot of ground, and I think we all have a clear understanding of each other's view at this point. Continuing the conversation doesn't seem useful at this point. Let's stop for now."
- "I've exhausted my ability to move this conversation forward and think I should work with my agency about next steps. Let me talk with my director and I will get back with you soon."

Staying Future-focused

When people are in conflict, particularly relational conflict, the emotions, and the experiences that brought them to this point are ever present. One technique to help maintain productive conversation is to keep orienting the parties toward the future. The past cannot be changed, and there is little likelihood of resolving a past hurt or past perceived wrongs during an IFSP meeting or during the provision of services.

Reminding parties that the focus of the conversation is going to be on the future (e.g., future scheduling, future services, future communication) keeps them looking at what can be managed and planned. It allows the parents to envision opportunities and new strategies.

Some example statements include:

- “Yes, that was a problem previously. What we need to determine is how to make sure it is fixed moving forward.”
- “That must have been very difficult. What are your suggestions for ensuring this works in the future?”
- “We cannot change what happened before, but we can develop a plan that is likely to work well from here on out. What ideas do you have for next steps?”
- “What do you need to feel confident that this situation will be successful?”

Maintain Focus on Supporting the Child

When people are in conflict, they can lose focus on the goal, resulting in escalation or losing the point of the meeting.

Here are some helpful steps to re-centering the focus when it becomes derailed by conflicts:

- Suggest the parents take a moment to review the family’s concerns for their child.
- Remind the parents of their common goal to meet the child’s needs.
- Review any points that have already been mutually agreed upon to show the parents that they have the ability to be collaborative.
- Revisit priorities and clarify whether they need to be adjusted.
- Take time to unpack underlying concerns that are informing strong positions and offer support in finding alternative options to address the concern.



Continuing Professional Development

Learning how to work with those in conflict requires advanced skill development. Fortunately, there are many resources available to develop your conflict engagement and facilitation skills.

Suggestions for professional development include:

- Exploring your role, skill set, and comfort level with supporting families experiencing intra-family conflict with your supervisor, colleagues, or organizational leaders;
- Identifying professional development resources available to improve meeting facilitation and conflict engagement skills;
- Join a book club or self-learning group that focuses on communication improvement strategies, effective listening behaviors, or mediation skills;
- Explore courses offered through higher education and community education venues;
- Identify community and state resources available to families experiencing intra-family conflict and determine when to refer families to other resources.

Additional Resources

[In the Best Interest of the Child](#)

Webinars:

[Playing Nicely Together: Family-centered Practices to Help Practitioners and Families Work Together](#)

[Practical Strategies for Helping Parents in Conflict: Assisting Divorced or Estranged Parents through the IEP Process](#)

[Productive Conversations Through Empathy](#)

[Skilled Dialogue \(Part 1 and Part II\)](#)

[Moving Beyond Disputes: Mobilizing and Orchestrating a “Village” When Extensive Change is Required](#)

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