

Transcription Episode Two, October 2021: Leading from the Floor: An Early Intervention Leadership Podcast *From Critical Conversations to Creating Connections*

Gina Federico

Welcome to leading from the floor, an Early Intervention leadership podcast. This series is produced by Early Intervention technical assistance on behalf of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning. The topic of today's podcast is critical conversations to creating connections. We'll spend some time talking about communicating and collaborating successfully with families, staff, partners and providers, in addition to discussing problem solving with families and we'll finish our podcast with a great discussion about management versus leadership. Before we jump in, I want to take a moment to meet our cohosts.

Jen Furness

0:44

Hi, everyone. My name is Jen Furness and I've held almost every role a teacher can in preschool Early Intervention, in addition to many years as a preschool Early Intervention supervisor in two programs in southeastern PA. I've spent most of my doctoral work focusing on staff morale and Early Intervention, and I'm so glad you all are listening to us today. Now I'm going to pass things over to my colleague Brandi.

Brandi Binakonsky

1:06

Thanks, Jen. Hi, everyone. I'm Brandi Binakonsky. I've also spent the majority of my career in preschool Early Intervention as both a supervisor and program administrator in southwestern Pennsylvania. During this time, I was fortunate to have been part of the Pennsylvania fellowship program for special education leaders and the OCDEL policy fellowship, and I'm delighted to be here with all of you.

Liz Wagner-Simmons

Hi, I'm Liz Wagner Simmons also with EITA. I've been involved with EI in different capacities for many, many years, both at the county level as an EI coordinator and service coordinator supervisor and then with OCDEL as an EI advisor. Early Intervention is a wonderful field and I hope that you find this podcast engaging and helpful.

Gina Federico

1:48

And Hi, I'm Gina Federico, I have lots of preschool Early Intervention and early childhood classroom experience, and I organize the OCDEL Policy Fellowship. Before we dive into our discussion about collaboration and communication, I want to provide a few quick reminders. First, please know that reports for your annual determination that you will receive in January that

are used to develop your QEPs were pulled in October and November. In addition, remember to remind your staff that for newly identified children plans happening around this time needed to be finalized by December one for child count. Now I want to spend some time talking about the dispute resolution process. A special thank you to Ellen Castagneto within the Bureau of Early Intervention Services and Family Supports for providing this information to share with all of you.

Liz Wagner-Simmons

2:44

Whenever we're working together as part of a team, sometimes not everyone will be on the same page. In Early Intervention when there's a disagreement, the use of dispute resolution process may come into play. However, it's important to remember that the true focus is on the child, their needs, their progress, and this should always be the focus for the whole team. After the family contacts the local Early Intervention program, if a disagreement has not been resolved, the next step recommended is the parent called the bureau. If the bureau is contacted, they make sure that families and programs hear their options and ensure their concerns are heard and understood. The process is primarily focused on meeting the child's needs.

Gina Federico

3:29

The majority of calls that advisors receive are from parents who have a concern. They're not always sure if they want to file a complaint. However, if parents are filing a complaint as part of the process, it is commonly related to them not knowing their rights and or who to contact, concerns about whether the child is making progress or receiving their services, or the families not hearing back from the program when they've tried to contact them with a concern. It is key that Early Intervention programs internalize that family rights and procedural safeguards are there to protect the child, family, and the program. There are a variety of dispute resolution options available to support effective communication, teamwork, and a focus on the child's needs. They include talking with a bureau advisor, filing a complaint, and additional dispute resolution options from the Office of Dispute Resolution or ODR, such as mediation and due process. For more information on ODR, check out the Office of Dispute Resolution overview job aid on the professional development page of the EBITA portal.

Liz Wagner-Simmons

4:40

Now as we think about the topic of problem solving and dispute resolution, we can think about all the ways in which we interact with families in order to promote successful engagement and communication. Successful communication begins at the time of the first contact with the family. This sets the stage for upcoming interactions. Think about a phone call that you might have had to make regarding a concern about yourself or a family member in order to see what help might be available to you. It could be about a medical concern or maybe how to problem solve a

customer service issue. As we all know first impressions can set the stage for what you might expect going forward. Let's think about some of these. For example, what were the approaches and attitudes that help you feel connected and heard? Did you experience openness and a willingness to explain the process? Did you feel like you were heard and understood, that you were a part of whatever was going to be happening to get help? And did you know whom to contact if you had questions or concerns and if you brought concerns to them, how did they approach your feedback? When families contact an Early Intervention program all the things we just outlined in your own experience with seeking help might apply to them. As discussed earlier, one of the most crucial pieces for problem solving is telling the family who to contact if they have a concern. It's important that each person who interacts with the family is familiar with the steps that a family might take if they have a concern. Although the designated contact person may be the Service Coordinator or the preschool lead or supervisor, everyone who interacts with the family has the responsibility to ensure that the family knows whom they could contact and what are the next steps when they have a concern.

Gina Federico

6:28

To round out this portion of today's podcast, we are joined by Nicole McCarthy, a family member whose daughter receives Early Intervention speech services. Notice how Nicole talks about the ways in which the team partner together by sharing progress monitoring information and resources effectively. She reminds us just how powerful, effective and efficient good communication can be.

Nicole McCarthy

6:55

Hi, my name is Nicole McCarthy. I am the mother of a family of four. I've been married for about five years to my husband Sean. We have a one-year-old son Nolan and a three year old daughter Reagan. Reagan's who I'll mostly be speaking about today. Reagan has been receiving speech for, since she was about two years old. As a family we like to take walks with our dogs, spend a lot of time at the pool, beach vacations. We usually end up at a park or a playground nearby in our community. Reagan is very active and social. She participates in gymnastics, swim, music, and dance class. After Reagan turned three she began receiving services virtually. We saw progress almost immediately. We're thankful for the constant communication. Updates and paperwork were provided through a website called My keepcurrent.com, which electronically notified me through email after every weekly session that she had with her therapist. This came in the form of a session note. What was really helpful was my child's team supporting Reagan's progress. They were able to offer suggestions from her therapist on how to promote continuous progress. Simple tidbits like explaining the tongue placement for sound cues. Those are mind blowing. I'm not a speech therapist, so that made the world of a difference to me. I could tell immediately that our therapist knew what she was talking about and I began to develop trust. A strong partnership was initiated amongst us. She even recommended books from our local library to align with the sounds that they were working on. This helped me feel part of the team and feel

like we were all working on the same page, same page for the same end goal. I was on cloud nine to learn ways that I could support therapy. Most importantly, this collaboration supported Reagan's progress. If I had questions I simply emailed her therapist and received supportive and efficient communication. As part of Reagan's IEP progress. Progress was also monitored quarterly and reported to us. These reports consistently came as qualitative data represented, representing her strengths within graphs. It was a summary of all the session notes through that visual representation. So the graph charted her weekly progress in the plot graph, but it also had a trend line noted too. Progress notes were coded to note whether she was making or maintaining progress or regressing in a certain area. These reports also included the amount of time spent addressing her specific IEP goals. As a first time parent, I was unfamiliar with all the different developmental milestones. It was very helpful to have progress explained in relation to what was typically expected. I recognize that this might be too much information for some families, but it was perfect for me. I hope that all the families are given opportunities to receive that level of information. If the family does not understand then it's important to be explained in a way that can be grasped. From the evaluator to the therapist, it felt like we've built a family. I look forward to continuing to receive services for Regan as she enters into three-year-old preschool this fall.

Gina Federico

10:04

Thank you again to Nicole for sharing her story and to Ellen for her contributions and helping us learn more about the dispute resolution process. As we heard, critical communication is key in preventing challenges and in problem solving with families. However, this is also important in being a good leader and managing your program well. In essence, infant toddler or preschool leaders need to ensure that all staff are aware of how to problem solve effectively with families and inform them of those dispute resolution options. But is training professional staff on topics like this, acting as a manager or a leader? For that I'd like to hear more from my colleagues, Jen and Brandi.

Jen Furness

10:49

Every job description for a potential leader states good management skills are required, but there's rarely a definition. Management is concerned primarily with getting the work of the organization completed in an efficient and effective manner. The management tasks that leaders may need to complete to get the job done on a daily basis might include things like provider or union contracts, timelines, scheduling, fiscal responsibilities, transportation and subbing issues everyone's favorite, professional development and prioritizing appropriately just to name a few. Management skills are the skills needed to continue these day-to-day logistics of your program effectively. The professional standards for educational leaders state that an education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment.

Brandi Binakonsky

11:41

Understanding the vast responsibilities that make up leadership, the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children developed recommended practices that serve as guidance for the field. They highlight leadership practices that include development of evidence based professional development, the collection of use of data for program management, and improvement, all of which were referenced as those necessary managerial skills. Now with that in mind, the concept of blending comes in part, meaning that leadership incorporates management skills. It is easy to make the connection that while not all managers are leaders all leaders have managerial skills.

Jen Furness

12:21

Leadership on the other hand, focuses attention on the future or what needs to be done. Its focus is on the vision and empowerment and reaching goals. While the manager will direct the workforce to complete the required tasks the most efficient way, the leader tends to inspire or venture into new ways of doing things. Managers do things right, but leaders do the right things. Managers tend to focus their attention on getting tasks completed in an efficient and effective manner whereas leaders are more focused on trying to understand the people in the organization and gain their trust in Early Intervention. We need a combination of both to be successful for our children and families. If one is lacking over the other, our capabilities begin to be questioned and the morale of our staff will be at risk. The top three skills needed as a manager in Early Intervention leadership are being organized, detail oriented and data driven. Being data driven should be one of the easier skills to tackle. We know data like the back of our hand in relation to IFSP and IEP goals for kids and already have a pretty good understanding of the data used in our local determinations each year. Challenge yourself to move beyond that to use data for making programmatic decisions. Utilize the new deeper dive into data Padlet on the EITA leadership page of the portal to your advantage and consider gathering stakeholder feedback from LICC's and families before making long term decisions about your program. Reach out to your advisor or EITA consultant today with any questions

Brandi Binakonsky

13:45

With such a great deal. of information, it can be overwhelming. It's difficult to know exactly where to start. Therefore, as we talked about in our first podcast, give yourself some grace and space. Begin building on things such as trust, teamwork, and communication. When you focus on making connections with others, you're demonstrating your willingness to be sensitive to the needs of staff and respond to them in a way that builds what many call high quality relationships, which are necessary for establishing respect. A focus on making connections, especially families and staff, is critical to providing them with what they need to be their best and in the process, it empowers them to become agents of change for the greater good. Consider the statistic that 70 to

80% of time spent by those in a leadership role involves interpersonal communication. That's a tremendous amount of time, but think of the meaningfulness that comes through having face to face conversations, whether in zoom or in person. Making personal connections enhances this process.

Jen Furness

14:51

Has anyone ever told you how to organize yourself? You need to be organized in order to even think about all the details involved in running an Early Intervention program. Visit the organization called Employee Assistance Network, which is a resource you'll find linked below in the resource section for eight practical ways to get started. Truly give yourself time to read the one page of advice and then challenge yourself to focus on one a day for the next eight workdays. Two of my favorites are making lists at the beginning of your day and staying organized with 15 minute time commitments. If you give yourself the attention you deserve, it will make a huge difference.

Brandi Binakonsky

15:30

And thinking of the importance that comes with organization and the ability to plan, leaders are also able to use these skills to support the creation of what the Division for Early Childhood calls a culture and climate in which practitioners feel a sense of belonging and want to support the organization's mission and goals. Sharing and collaborating are words that have been most commonly used when we work with Early Intervention leaders in describing what it takes to move a vision forward. We know it can feel risky to take this approach but when you build a network, you can learn from your colleagues to confirm ideas, challenge your opinion and gather their insight in other perspectives that you cannot see independently. There's a quote from Helen Keller that serves as a reminder that we are not on this journey alone. She says "alone we can do so little, together we can do so much." At times it feels as if we are racing through our day and we must keep looking straight ahead just to make it through. Yet, when we do this we really miss out on that opportunity to look at those who are surrounding us and how valuable it is to work together.

Jen Furness

16:29

Management is needed for parts of the processes and procedures to keep flowing. When you're exploring the necessary details of a problem or topic, challenge yourself to be detail oriented only when needed. For instance, always be detail oriented the first time you complete a task, but if you can delegate the skills to someone else, be detailed the first time and then build their competence the second and third time by truly releasing the work. This will prevent you from accidentally acquiring a reputation as a micromanager. There are many ways for things to be done well. They don't have to be done to your personal standards every time. The problem we

may run into is when the managerial side is pushed into place before the trusting network of relationships is established.

Brandi Binakonsky

17:09

And consider how things can grow when you move out of the micromanagement space to the empowerment and commitment, to sharing knowledge and growth between and among staff, stakeholders and families. Barnett and Weidenfeller stated “shared decision making is a particular type of confidence building practice that influences employee and team commitment to organizational goals”.

Gina Federico

17:33

In Early Intervention, it's easy to lose sight of building that foundation when we're faced with problems to solve around every corner. However, if those networks are functionally in place, the problems are solved more quickly. As Seth Godin said, “your job as a leader is to connect challenge, build a culture, communicate, be clear about it, commit to where we are going”. Thank you all again so much for listening to us today. Before we leave, I want to remind everyone that you can find resources to support this episode of the podcast and so much more on the EITA portal at www.eita-pa.org . Make sure to check out the leadership page and review additions and updates to the Early Intervention leadership guide for a trove of information to support your work, day in and day out. Don't forget to share this podcast with your colleagues. Thanks again for listening to leading from the floor an Early Intervention leadership Podcast. I'm Gina.

18:42

I'm Jen, I'm Brandi, and I'm Liz.

Gina Federico

18:44

Join us again next time when we talk more about leading from the floor. We'll see you then.