



## Chapter 1

# Collaborating Effectively

**Success in the inclusive classroom** is due in large part to collaboration with others in the school. Teaching an inclusive classroom is difficult to do alone, and there are systems in place so that you don't have to. In this chapter, we look at some general ways of making collaboration work for you.

### Collaborating for Intervention

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All teachers are eager to communicate information to all of their students. If a student is struggling with classroom performance or cannot understand the material presented in class, then you need to assist and monitor this student to try to help him or her. This chapter focuses on what to do when this approach fails: how to help students when the work continues to be difficult, even after extra assistance has taken place, and there has to be an intervention.

Often a teacher will ask, "What do I do with a student who is having difficulties learning in my class? How can I get him or her help? Do I need to request an evaluation to see if special education is necessary?"

Teachers often bring this topic of discussion to a member of the Child Study Team for advice. A Child Study Team is a group of specialists who

are trained to determine if a child has a learning disability. The team is primarily made up of a psychologist, a learning specialist, and a social worker. The first question that the Child Study Team should pose is, “What prereferral intervention strategies have been implemented, and what was the student outcome?”

Prereferral intervention strategies are generally determined by a committee of general education teachers before any specialists are included in the plan. The committee’s job is to try to assist students who are failing subjects within the confines of the general education setting. The student’s main subject teachers, along with the guidance counselor, meet to discuss what can be changed in the classroom setting to enhance student progress. Typical prereferral intervention strategies at the middle school level can include these:

- Changing the student’s seat
- Calling parents for a conference
- Talking with the student
- Assigning the student to a “study buddy”
- Changing the student’s teacher
- Placing the student on a weekly behavioral progress sheet, signed by parents and teachers
- Placing the student on a weekly homework modification sheet, signed by parents and teachers
- Suggesting after-school assistance or tutoring
- Deciding if the student should attend basic skills classes
- Retention

The teachers then agree to implement specific modifications, deciding on a meeting date to monitor the child’s progress and determine if the outcome was positive. If progress is not being made, a referral to the Child Study Team may be warranted.

A checklist can be a helpful aid in determining a clear plan of action. This information can be stored in the student’s permanent record folder (see next page).

## Collaborating with the Child Study Team

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Establishing positive relationships with all members of the school is important. In an inclusive classroom, open lines of communication between the general and special education teachers, as well as with support personnel, are essential for a thorough understanding of all students’ learning needs. Discussions with past and present teachers, as well as a complete record review, can give the middle school teacher insight into planning for students in the inclusive classroom. The Child Study Team can be an excellent resource for further information on a particular student’s special needs. The members of the team can also offer assistance in implementing modifications and learning strategies set forth by an Individual Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a document that explains a plan of action and program tailored to a student’s specific learning and behavioral needs. This is a legal document. It’s contents must be agreed on by the child’s parents or guardians and implemented in school by the teachers.

# Checklist for Prereferral Interventions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason for meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Fill in the following prereferral interventions to be implemented and monitored:

Intervention	Person Responsible	Date Implemented
Calls to parents		
Changing student's seat in the classroom		
Interview with student		
Student visit to guidance counselor		
Parent conference		
Suggestions for after-school assistance or tutoring		
Assigning a study buddy		
Assigning a weekly behavioral progress sheet, signed by parents and teachers		
Recommendation for basic skills or compensatory assistance		
Retention		
Additional classroom interventions		

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Follow-up meeting date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Members of the Child Study Team**

The core specialists on the Child Study Team are a psychologist, an education therapist, and a social worker. (A speech and language specialist is also part of the core team, but only for preschool students.) These individuals are trained in the diagnosis and remediation of learning disabilities. The team may also include additional professionals who can offer classroom strategies and home suggestions, such as special and general education teachers, school nurses and other staff, speech and motor therapists, paraprofessionals, and the child's parents.

### **School Psychologist**

In many states, the school psychologist is the main support person responsible for assessing the learning levels of students who are referred to the Child Study Team. He or she can do this through standardized and nonstandardized assessments that measure learning strengths and weaknesses. The most popular tool used by the school psychologist is an individual Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test. The IQ test, an accepted measure of intellectual functioning nationwide, offers one way to assess students' verbal and nonverbal abilities. The assessment is administered individually and is completed in approximately one two-hour session.

The school psychologist may also assess the student's academic levels in mathematics, reading, written language, and oral language, as well as learning styles and strengths and weaknesses, through specific diagnostic standardized testing instruments, functional assessments, report card grades, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and past standardized test performance.

Finally, the school psychologist assesses any emotional and behavioral concerns that may impede the learning process. This evaluation can be accomplished through interviews with the student, teachers, and parents, as well as using scales and instruments designed to measure these adaptive functions.

### **The Learning Disabilities Teacher/Consultant or Educational Therapist (LDT/C or Educational Diagnostician)**

Not all states have an LDT/C or educational therapist as part of their school teams. The main roles of this person as a team member are to complete psychoeducational testing to determine the student's academic strengths and weaknesses and develop remedial modifications to aid in therapeutically teaching the student with disabilities. The LDT/C can also do what a psychologist does as part of the Child Study Team. He or she measures specific levels in mathematics, reading, and written and oral language, and then develops skills and strategies to be used in the classroom for remediation.

### **School Social Worker**

The school social worker is responsible for obtaining student and family background information and determining if the child's home life now or in the past is having an impact on his or her educational performance. Family, birth, and developmental history are obtained through an interview with the parents. School social workers also can help students during times of impending or actual individual or school crisis.

### **Speech and Language Therapists**

The job of the speech and language therapist on the Child Study Team is to determine if a student's articulation and language abilities are standing in the way of the child's learning success in school. Through standardized and functional assessment tools, these therapists can determine if the child has weaknesses in phonology, syntax, articulation, or written language. If they diagnose a communication disorder, the Child Study Team can prescribe individual, group, or collaborative therapy.

### **Special Education Teachers**

Special education teachers are trained to teach skills and strategies for remediation purposes and are in part responsible for implementing the educational modifications designated in IEPs. They are knowledgeable in working with students with learning disabilities and can be essential as support teachers, along with paraprofessionals, in the inclusive classroom.

### **General Education Teachers**

General education teachers in the middle school environment are teachers who specialize in one area of the curriculum, such as English, history, math, reading, or science. They collaborate with special education teachers and paraprofessionals to communicate their subject matter effectively to all students in an inclusive classroom. This is accomplished by cooperative planning and development of pretests, worksheets, learning strategies, study guides, modifications, and reviews.

### **School Nurse**

The school nurse is required to complete vision and hearing screenings and check attendance, as well as offer specific nursing services to special and general education students. These services can include administering medications, changing catheters, checking hearing devices, storing wheelchairs, and monitoring blood pressure and sugar levels.

### **Guidance Counselors**

Guidance counselors work as liaisons with the teachers, students, parents, administration, and school team. They arrange prereferral meetings with the teachers to identify and determine intervention strategies for students who are struggling in the general education environment. They also make sure that prereferral interventions are executed and outcomes are monitored. Guidance counselors are responsible for administering standardized tests, recording grades, and monitoring all students. In a middle school environment, it is not unusual to have a guidance counselor assigned to each grade level.

### **School Administration**

Principals, vice principals, and deans of students are part of the school administration. An ongoing relationship between classroom teachers and the school administration is essential when identifying students with learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral difficulties, because these professionals are often the first people to address consequences stemming from the manifestations of student problems in the classroom. The principals and student deans are usually responsible for assigning detentions, suspensions, and expulsions from school.

### **Physical Therapists**

Physical therapists evaluate and provide therapies to strengthen gross motor skills. They provide these services in an individual, small-group, or natural setting according to their own and the Child Study Team's recommendations. Recently there has been an increase in administering therapies in a natural setting, such as the school hallway. For a student who needs strength walking in a natural setting, the therapist walks with the student during passing time. A natural setting does not change or contrive the environment for therapy.

### **Occupational Therapists**

Occupational therapists evaluate and provide therapies to strengthen fine motor and organizational skills. In a younger child, individual therapy often seeks to strengthen hand and finger muscles, correct pencil grip, and help the child gain motor control while writing. For older students, occupational therapists are brought in to help enhance students' written expression and organizational skills. These services are provided in an individual, small-group, or natural setting.

### **Paraprofessionals**

Paraprofessionals, part of the school team in an inclusive classroom, assist the teacher in implementing both group and individual lesson plans. They collaborate with the teacher on strategies and ideas, mark papers, teach small-group lessons, reinforce and review information presented in class, and arrange materials for small-station instruction. They also perform many routine classroom duties, such as collecting and organizing class assignments, homework, and projects.

### **Personal Aides**

Personal aides can be part of a special education student's IEP. The personal aide's role is to assist assigned students with specific personal needs related to the school environment, such as those who may need additional assistance navigating a building with a wheelchair or with a walker, or using an elevator. The checklist on the next page will help teachers determine with whom to confer first.

### **Referral Interventions**

Sometimes teachers can have great success with minimal modifications within the general education classroom setting. At other times, the learning or behavioral difficulties are too severe, and students continue to do poorly in spite of prereferral intervention strategies. If this is determined, a follow-up meeting may be scheduled to discuss the possibilities of a referral to the Child Study Team. If possible Child Study Team services have been decided on at this meeting, a referral form is then filled out by one or more teachers to be addressed by the Intervention and Referral Services Committee (I&RS).

The IRS includes at least one general and one special education teacher, the guidance counselor, and one member of the Child Study Team. The referring teacher brings information on current classroom performance, grades, and results of the prereferral intervention strategies that were implemented for the child in question. The committee, with the help of the Child Study Team representative, decides if a team evaluation is warranted at this time.

# Prereferral Collaboration with School Personnel Checklist

Teachers who encounter problem situations do not always know whom to ask for assistance or advice. Complete the exercise below to test your own knowledge of personnel roles and resources.

## With Whom Should I Confer First?

Use the information that has been presented so far in this chapter and advice from your own Child Study Team to determine the best person to speak to first regarding initial concerns about a student. Read through the following situations and use the list of abbreviations at the end of the list to mark each concern with the appropriate person to talk to.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Andrew may need to go to summer school, or retaining him seems evident.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Joshua has difficulties completing math homework, and his grade average for the marking period will be lower as a result.
- \_\_\_\_\_ In spite of several intervention strategies, Tyler has difficulties with reading comprehension skills.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Eric sits in the back of the classroom all day and doesn't make eye contact with anyone. He is not completing his work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Brianna broke her leg and needs a key to the elevator.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Aisha has severe headaches and needs medication at lunchtime in school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sarah was caught cheating during a midterm exam.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Elle, a new student with spina bifida, needs additional exercises added to her program.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Part of a new program involves setting up station materials for students to learn math in different modalities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Alex needs a study guide for an upcoming social studies test.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Michael's handwriting looks very labored and resembles that of a much younger child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Several students were upset after the unexpected death of a classmate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Last year in sixth grade, Juan did well in science, but this year he is failing the class.

### *List of Abbreviations*

Psy = School psychologist	Para = Paraprofessional
LDT/C = Learning consultant or educational therapist	Gui = Guidance counselor
Soc = School social worker	Adm = Administration
OT = Occupational therapist	Spec = Special education teacher
PT = Physical therapist	Gen = General education teacher
SN = School Nurse	

## The Case Manager

If the I&RS decides that a Child Study Team evaluation might be warranted, a person on the team who is designated to be the case manager contacts the parents. Throughout the evaluation process, the case manager has these responsibilities:

- Facilitating communication between the parents and the school staff
- Communicating with the guidance counselor and teachers
- Understanding the student's learning strengths and weaknesses in the classroom
- Becoming knowledgeable of the student's abilities, home circumstances, and ongoing progress in school throughout the evaluation
- Understanding and implementing time lines for prompt completion of evaluations and for program eligibility as mandated by state and federal law

At this point, the case manager sends a formal written letter to the student's parents stating that a meeting has been scheduled to discuss their child's progress and a possible Child Study Team evaluation.

## The Planning Meeting

During the planning meeting, the core team of specialists must be present, along with the referring teacher and parent. If the child shows apparent weaknesses in speech and language or is receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) services, the speech and language therapist may also be invited. (Speech and language specialists must be present for younger students; this is optional at the middle school level.) At this meeting, the parent and referring teacher voice their concerns, and an evaluation plan is determined based on the scope of the problem.

At least two evaluations, to be completed by core team members, must be recommended to set the process in motion. The specialists may recommend some of these evaluations:

- *Educational evaluation.* Administered by the educational therapist, LDT/C, or psychologist, this evaluation assesses the student's learning strengths and weaknesses, assesses the student's academic level, and identifies his or her learning styles.
- *Psychological evaluation.* Administered by the school psychologist, this evaluation primarily assesses basic aptitude and abilities as related to school performance. Adaptive behavior can be evaluated using a variety of scales to determine the child's emotional and behavioral states.
- *Developmental history.* This is completed by the school social worker in an interview with the parent to determine the child's birth and developmental history, as well as address pertinent family concerns.
- *Speech and language evaluation.* Administered by the speech and language therapist, this evaluation assesses the child's articulation and oral and written language.

These evaluations are generally completed by a core member of the Child Study Team. At the planning meeting, the members may determine that other evaluations are warranted—for example:

- *Physical therapy evaluation.* This is completed by a physical therapist, usually hired by the school system to assess the child's gross motor skills.



- *Occupational therapy evaluation.* Completed by an occupational therapist, usually hired by the school system, this evaluation assesses hand strength, fine motor abilities, self-help skills, written expression, and organizational skills.
- *Psychiatric evaluation.* Usually completed by an outside psychiatrist, this evaluation is recommended for students with severe behavioral or emotional concerns.
- *Vision and hearing screening.* The initial screening is completed by the school nurse. If a problem is detected, the nurse then refers the student to an ophthalmologist or audiologist.
- *Neurological evaluation.* An evaluation of the neurological system is usually completed by an outside neurologist. Students with severe attention or focusing concerns may be referred by the team to a neurologist to determine the root cause of this difficulty.
- *Audiological evaluation.* This is an outside evaluation, usually recommended for students with symptoms of severe language processing disorders.
- *Technology evaluation.* This evaluation, completed by an outside specialist, determines if any technological equipment, such as an augmentative device for speaking or an FM system for hearing, may be necessary to aid in an appropriate education for the student.

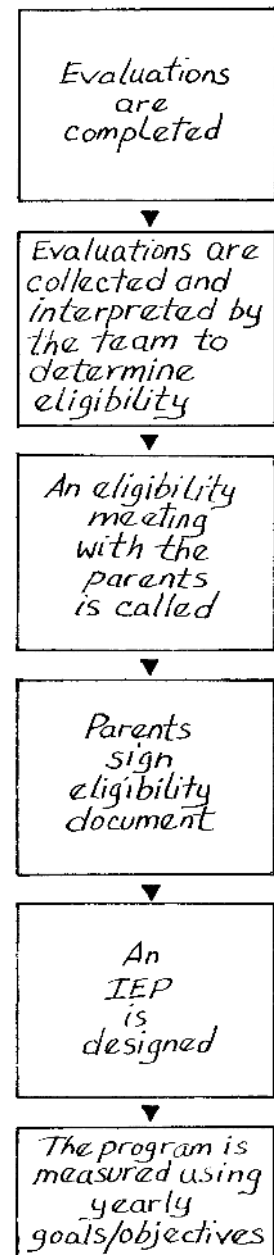
### The Evaluation Process

Once the evaluation has begun, the team collaborates and collects and interprets results from the evaluations. The case manager is the facilitator in coordinating all information necessary to determine the child's eligibility for a special education program. Guidelines and time lines for the evaluation process are mandated by state laws.

When all the reports are collected, the team decides whether the student is eligible for special services and if a learning disability exists. An eligibility meeting is held with the parents to determine classification. Once the parent signs the eligibility document, an IEP is designed to address the student's learning strengths and weaknesses through placement, skills, strategies, subject levels, and classroom modifications. The program is measured yearly through the development of goals and objectives. The case manager monitors the program.

All students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education according to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), a federal law passed in 1975. A free and appropriate education must take place in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and be designed to address each student's unique and special needs. These provisions for special education and related services including parental and student rights, are valid from ages three to twenty-one. This evaluation process is illustrated in Figure 1.1, and page 12 provides teachers with a step-by-step checklist to guide them in the referral process.

**Figure 1.1**



## Checklist for Referring a Student to the School Team

As a classroom teacher, have I completed the following?

- ☐ Met with the prereferral intervention team?
- ☐ Implemented interventions over an appropriate and mutually decided length of time?
- ☐ Documented the lack of intervention progress?
- ☐ Filled out a referral sheet?
- ☐ Brought information to the I&RS committee chairperson?
- ☐ Attended an IRS meeting with information completed on the referral sheet and presented the information to the committee?

## Notes

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## Collaborating with Parents and Families

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Part of a teacher's professional success relies on building a strong, open communication line between the home and school. A positive connection between home and school increases the overall success of a child's learning.

It is imperative to empower all parents by helping them realize that they are an integral part of their child's education. Parents can offer important insights into their child's study habits, behaviors, past homework history, health, sleep patterns, and general personality characteristics. These factors, which may not be readily apparent in the classroom environment, can have an impact on achievement for both general education and special needs students.

Research on student success in school found that participation in educational activities at home had a positive influence on school success. Results suggest that enhancing parental involvement in a child's schooling relates to overall improved school performance. One reason may be that parents of higher-achieving students set higher standards for their children's educational activities than do parents of low-achieving students.

### Encouraging Parental Involvement

Family participation in a child's education is more predictive of a student's academic success than socioeconomic status. Parental involvement can lead to:

- Higher grades
- Higher test scores
- Better attention
- Increased motivation
- Lower rate of suspension
- Decreased use of drugs and alcohol
- Fewer instances of violent behavior
- Higher self-esteem

Parents may have to become a bit more creative in their types of involvement as the child enters middle school. However, parental involvement at this level is just as important as in the earlier grades. Here are some tips for teachers to share with parents to create an educational environment at home for the middle school student.

### Reading with Young Teens

Establish a time and place each day where the family can read a book, newspaper, or magazine together and have a discussion centered around a topic of interest to everyone. Mealtime is a great time for discussion; however, this is sometimes a hectic time, and discussions can be dominated by more practical matters, so try right after dinner before everyone scatters. In the car, discussions revolving around audiobooks encourage listening comprehension skills.

### **Modeling Educational Behavior**

Show your child that there is a purpose to reading and pursuing educational activities by engaging in them yourself. For example, have a favorite book you are reading in plain sight, encourage your child to help you find a new recipe in a magazine or cookbook, explain how to read stock prices in the newspaper while checking your stocks (make it more interesting by pointing out the stock prices of companies that your child might recognize, like McDonald's or Abercrombie & Fitch), or research a vacation to a coveted spot together on the Internet. Here, your teen will learn that participating in educational pursuits has relevance to everyday living.

### **Guiding Television and Movie Watching**

Monitor the television programs and movies that young teens are watching. Find out about the content of the television shows and movies your teen wants to watch before making decisions about teen viewing. Limit the amount of time he or she spends watching television each day. Encourage TV shows and movies that are educational and foster interests or hobbies.

### **Monitoring Video Games and the Internet**

Video games are addicting, and parents need to monitor their children's use of them carefully. They need to limit the amount of time their teen spends playing games and encourage wise video game choices, such as sports or mystery games. They can use video games as a treat or purposeful recreational activity. In addition to being a place to do research, the Internet is a great communication source. Teens love to come home from school and talk to their friends on the computer. Some of this socializing is necessary for their social growth. However, parents have to be mindful of the amount of time their teens spend instant messaging or chatting on the computer. Use parental controls offered through online sources, and know whom your child is talking to. Again, allow the child this time as a reward or purposeful recreational activity when homework is completed or during a scheduled break. Also, helping your child develop other interests and encouraging him or her to participate in after-school activities will leave less free time for idle chatting.

### **Monitoring Cell Phone Use**

Cell phones are not allowed in most classrooms. Nevertheless, check your cell phone bill carefully to monitor the times and number of text messages that your teen may be sending. If there are excessive texts on your bill during school hours, you may want to make sure your teen knows that he or she should not be texting in class.

### **Encouraging After-School Activities**

Enroll young teens in after-school activities like sports, dance, or chess, or encourage involvement in clubs or other organizations within the school, such as student council or teen theater groups. These can foster healthy interests and friendships, as well as provide structured learning activities beyond the hours of the traditional school day.

### **Following a Consistent Routine**

Set specific times for recreation, structured activities, homework, family interaction, and bedtime. Setting schedules gives adolescents patterns and conditioning for behaviors that foster a productive home and work environment for all family members.

### **Setting High but Realistic Standards**

Encourage and praise your teen when he or she does his or her best, whatever the outcome. Teens are sensitive to criticism. If it is constructive and realistic, it can foster growth. Asking a child to get As in science when he or she does not have the aptitude is unrealistic and can have a negative impact on his or her self-esteem and cause unnecessary hurt feelings.

### **Handling Homework**

At this point in a child's schooling, the student should complete homework alone, with the parents ensuring that the work is being done and serving as a resource to their child. Sometimes teachers send home specific homework assignments designed to include family members. These help to stress the importance of education and show its relevance to real-life situations.

### **Establishing Positive Communications**

At the middle school level, collaborating effectively with families is somewhat different than it is at the elementary school level. Middle school teachers are specialists and are often responsible for at least five classes and over a hundred students in their content areas. Students no longer want their parents in the classroom, as was often encouraged at the elementary school level. Collaboration with telephone calls, report cards, and progress sheets are effective methods of communication between home and school, but all too often they become the only way parents and teachers communicate. Many times a problem becomes bigger because parents were informed too late.

In an inclusive classroom, parents are often needed as volunteer participants to monitor activities and prepare and organize supplies for the students, so it becomes easier to encourage parent participation. The teacher can recruit and organize parents using a volunteer sheet, where a few parents can rotate to aid in assisting station activities on a monthly basis. This way, parents have a productive way to visit the classroom and become involved. Their help in the classroom can certainly facilitate dialogue with their child about school, and their extra hands are usually more than welcome.

Also, if a parent has a particular talent that he or she would like to share with the class that is relevant to what is being covered in the curriculum, this should be encouraged. When the seventh-grade science class is studying animals and their habitats, a parent who is a veterinarian could speak to the students about practicing veterinary medicine, for example. Teachers can also send out a monthly classroom newsletter to inform parents of the activities that will take place that month. This will keep the parents informed of exactly what is happening and will contribute to open lines of communication, making it easier to handle any problems that might develop.

## Tips for Talking with Parents

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Even the most experienced and enthusiastic teachers run into problems and concerns with students from time to time. When talking to a parent, make sure you employ the following techniques, and always remember that the goal is to solve the problem and promote effective learning for all students in the classroom:

- Before the meeting, make an outline of what you want to say, and role-play the meeting to yourself.
- Try to talk in person. Face-to-face encounters usually leave less room for incorrect interpretation.
- Listen first. Allow the parent to talk first. There is nothing worse than talking about your concerns, only to find out that the parent has a different agenda.
- Always talk about the student's positive attributes first. Then state the problem.
- Speak slowly, clearly, and concisely.
- State the facts of the problem.
- Paraphrase all parent questions before answering. This will foster understanding.
- Check periodically for understanding or feedback from the parent while you are talking.
- Develop a plan of action with the parent that you mutually agree on and in which you are both active participants.
- Develop a second plan of action in case the initial plan does not work.
- Decide on a designated time when you can meet again to assess progress.

Whether to have the student present at these meetings should be decided between parent and teacher individually, because everyone reacts differently to teacher meetings.



The process of teaching is exciting and challenging, and it requires strong leadership and interpersonal skills. As with all other challenges, teaching can be overwhelming, especially when children are not responding to instruction. School personnel are in place to address specific student behaviors and learning needs when they occur. Part of the art of teaching is knowing when it is appropriate to seek out specific specialized personnel.

We hope this chapter has helped you focus on how to use support services while building positive communication lines with students and their families.