

## Partnering with Families to Support Inclusion: Part 2

Jennifer Fung: Hi, everybody. Good afternoon and welcome to our August Inclusion Series webinar. Thank you so much for joining us. Today we will be continuing our series on Partnering with Families to Support Inclusion. Settle in, get your favorite beverage and let's get started. I'm Jen Fung. I am the inclusion lead for the National Center on Early Childhood Development Teaching and Learning or DTL as we call it, and I am thrilled to be joined today by my friends and colleagues from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement or PFCE, Alexis and Lisa. Alexis and Lisa, do you want to say hello?

Alexis Tarbin: Sure. Hello everyone. My name is Alexis Tarbin as stated and I'm with the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement and I'm a training and technical assistance specialist. Wonderful to be with you all.

Lisa Sommella: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining us today. I am Lisa Sommella, also with the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. I'm excited to be here for the second part series. Thank you.

Jennifer: Thank you, Alexis, and Lisa. I'm excited. I'm feeling like this is a dream team. We'll be able to combine our knowledge of IDEA and systems and PFCE's expertise on engaging and partnering and supporting family advocacy. This is wonderful. Thank you to everyone who's joining us today. We are also joined by the question-and-answer dream team, Brittany, Katie, and Tam from DTL. If folks have questions, please use the purple Q&A widget to submit your questions throughout the webinar. Because our webinar platform does not have a regular chat feature, we'll also be using the Q&A widget to help folks engage.

There'll be times when we might ask you to reflect or respond to a prompt. Use the Q&A widget to do that as well. Before we jump in, I wanted to go over a couple of our learning objectives for today. Today, we are continuing our two-part series on Partnering with Families to Support Inclusion. In our first webinar in May, we talked about partnering with families and the importance of ongoing conversations with families when there are concerns about a child's development. Today, we're going to pick up in during the family journey and talk about once families are ready to move forward with referral to an IDEA agency.

We're going to talk specifically today about that referral and the eligibility evaluation process. We have two big goals: to identify strategies and share resources that we've heard from families that they find useful as they learn to navigate this referral and eligibility process. We're also going to explore and hear from program staff around strategies, specific strategies, specific resources that you can use as you partner with families to support, again, their navigation, but as families begin to develop advocacy skills during this IDEA referral and evaluation process.

One last quick reminder to download the viewer's guide. A copy of today's slides and our viewer's guide are available in the resource widget. Our viewer's guide is designed specifically to be a companion to the content that we'll be talking about during this webinar, and we'll refer to it often. There are lots of extra resources. If we touch on a topic or a content area, oftentimes we'll go more deeply into that content area with more suggestions, more resources in our viewer's guide. Be sure to take a second right now to download that if you haven't already. What do you think, Lisa and Alexis? Should we go ahead and get started?

Lisa: Yes. As Jen said, this is the second episode in a two-part series on Partnering with Families To Support Inclusion. In Part 1, we discussed those relationship-based strategies and having ongoing conversations about developmental concerns. We also introduced the concept of family readiness, which is to act on those developmental concerns. The concept of family readiness is to act or move forward when there's concerns about a child's development. Whether that's by asking those questions or learning more about the concerns or just moving forward with the referral process. All of these things seem to resonate with their viewer's in the May webinar.

We also received a lot of feedback for program staff and families of children with disabilities about how important it is to recognize family readiness. Meeting those families where they are and having those ongoing conversations with families to move forward in the process. The viewer's guide has more perspectives from your colleagues, so take a look. If you missed our May webinar, you can find the recording on DTL, Push Play, which they're going to share in the chat. Join your colleagues in the Disabilities and Inclusion Network on MyPeers to find more support and continue these great conversations.

In thinking about the family journey, I think it's important to remember that families encounter many steps and processes and transitions when they have a child with a disability or a suspected developmental delay. This process is often described as the family journey. By understanding this family journey and the process, we can help anticipate family needs, and it also helps us as we work and partner with our families in each step of the way and on this journey. We know this is not a one and done conversation. These are ongoing conversations throughout the process.

It's important to remember that while every family's experience is different, there are some common events that occur along this journey. Some of those events could be learning about or identifying developmental concerns, the referral to the IDE agency, that eligibility evaluation, the IFSP and IEP process, the transition, and there could be several more depending on the child and the family circumstances. It's also important to remember, and we learned this from our first webinar, that this journey is not a linear process. There are often barriers, there are delays, and roadblocks in this family journey.

In our first webinar in May, we focused on that very first checkpoint. Sharing and having those ongoing conversations with families about those developmental concerns. Today, we're going to focus on the next checkpoints, which is that referral to IDEA and the evaluation to determine if a child is eligible for IDEA services. Let's talk about the next steps in this family journey, the

referral and eligibility evaluation. Families have learned, and we talked a lot about this in our first webinar, those advocacy skills and ways to navigate the system by simply enrolling their child or children in Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

Just by that enrollment piece, they've already started advocating for high-quality learning experiences and programming for their child. We also know that Head Start program staff have always engaged families as advocates and leaders in their program. These are done through parent committees, parent meetings, policy council. Always finding ways to help parents become those advocates and leaders. Parents and families advocate and navigate even when they don't know they're doing it. Part of the role of program staff is to help families recognize they're already advocating for their child's learning and development, and to serve as their encouragement and support along the journey.

Program staff also support families' advocacy skills by helping them navigate the special education and IDEA system. Program staff ensure that families understand each step in this process, giving them timely and much-needed information that helps them prepare for those meetings and the big decision-making along this process. I think it's essential to remember that early childhood professionals should understand IDEA themselves and to know what the Head Start program performance standards say about referrals and evaluations and the eligibility so that they can truly serve as that guide on the side as parents and family members go through this process.

Jennifer: Thank you so much, Lisa. You're exactly right, and this is something we hear a lot from program staff, especially as we know that there's been turnover, and there are lots of new Head Start and Early Head Start staff who are partnering with families to support their journey as they receive early intervention or early childhood special education through those IDEA systems.

What we're going to be talking about today is specifically about that referral to the IDEA agency and that eligibility evaluation process. We'll be including lots of details about that process, both so program staff feel supported to share that information and resources with families, but also so that program staff who might be less familiar with those IDEA systems feel empowered themselves and feel confident in the knowledge about the IDEA system.

Like we mentioned, there are lots more resources for those who feel like they might need to brush up or remind themselves or learn something new about the IDEA system. Make sure to keep your viewer's guide handy. As we're talking about that referral and eligibility process, we'll share some information, but we also have a lot of great perspectives from families who have gone through this referral and evaluation process themselves, and from some program staff who have learned a lot and were willing to share knowledge with us today about what specific strategies they use as they're supporting families who are navigating these processes.

We know that families need support during the referral and evaluation process. What that support looks like, what questions families have, what information families need will vary from family to family, but we know that for many families, this is an introduction to a system that's brand new for many to the IDEA system. For many families, this can feel like a confusing and overwhelming process. We know that when it comes to IDEA, the processes, the people involved, the paperwork, there's a lot to learn. What's most important to know, where do we start? That will vary from family to family, but also as Head Start or Early Head Start staff, what our own knowledge and background and comfort feels like.

Let's take a look at two videos, one from a mom, one from a family, and then one from a program staff member talking about when we're first starting on this journey, what's most important to know. First, we'll take a look at a video from a mom who shared some of the questions she had, information that she was seeking and that she didn't even know she needed initially, and what was helpful to her at the beginning of her journey.

[Video begins]

Denise Bouyer: The support I got from peer families, as well as information that was brought to me, because when my daughter was born, I had no idea how to navigate the systems to get her care. I had no idea what to expect of her disabilities because I traveled in a world where I didn't see a lot of people with disabilities. Just connecting with other families, it turns out I was in a NICU with another mom whose son was Down Syndrome, and we started chatting, and she started sharing information to me that just opened my eyes about early intervention and about supports and about service coordinators who can help with her development.

All of that was just blowing my mind because I was like, wow, wow, and it made me hungry to learn a little bit more. I also found that there was a big communication gap, because number one, I was feeling a little insecure being a new mom and just having this responsibility of raising this child, that I had to do a lot of self-studies and learn about IDEA, learn about the Individuals with Disabilities Act, so that I know what type of supports that were there for my daughter. I had to learn about early intervention and what assessment and eligibility, what all of those terms meant.

At the same time, I was also navigating the medical jargon, trying to understand some of the language around my child's disability and what that meant and how to counter that. Just having that support and learning that I wasn't the only mom, I felt like, oh, my God, I'm the only person with a child with a disability, and I found it was a whole new world of loving, caring people who had information and that they were willing to share.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: Let's take a look at a video from a disabilities manager for Head Start and Early Head Start programs, who builds on what we just heard Denise say. What information has her program found is most important to provide for families? What questions do families have? As

you're listening to all of the videos, but as you're listening to Denisha, the disabilities manager in Dallas, share, we encourage you to reflect on what else is important.

If you're a family member of a child with a disability and you've been through this process, what did you wish you knew? What questions did you have? Or what information was helpful for you? Likewise, if you're a program staff member who's supporting families through this process, please share with us what you've learned about what families have found helpful and what that essential need-to-know information is at the very beginning of this referral and eligibility journey.

[Video begins]

Denisha: We see the biggest need for families is understanding the process and understanding what is going to take place. Because oftentimes, I think families, they sign the consent, we refer them, and if left without any kind of information, they're not sure what's going to happen. Sometimes we've even seen families where they've signed the consent and we have referred them and the agency has reached out to them, and they changed their mind totally because they weren't informed, and they didn't really understand and know what to expect. We've used that as a learning opportunity for our agency and our staff and helping the families truly understand prior to referral, explaining what that process looks like, explaining who may contact them, some of the questions that may be asked of them.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: We saw a lot of similarities. We heard from Denise, we heard from Denisha about an unknown system, an unknown language, not knowing what's going to happen or what to expect. That's the type of information that can be empowering to families as they embark on this journey through the referral and evaluation process. What we're going to focus on right now is that essential need to know information about IDEA, about the referral and eligibility process.

Knowing that there's a lot more information out there and that specific questions and need for resources that different families have may vary from family to family, but this is some crucial and critical information. What we're going to talk about is what to expect during that referral, evaluation, and eligibility determination process, including what is IDEA and specifically what does it mean to be eligible for IDEA services.

We're also going to talk about what's going to happen during the referral and eligibility process and how to help inform families about what's going to happen, including what will happen during the evaluation and what the timelines are. We'll talk a little bit about who's who, the different professionals, and what their roles are. We'll also talk a little bit about family rights. Thinking about hearing Denise say this, what is IDEA? We know that families who may not have heard of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides these specialized services for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, all the way up through age 21, individuals and their families.

Families, if they haven't heard about it, it's important for them to know what is IDEA, what services a child and family might receive if they're eligible, and how the services might benefit the child and families. We talked about that a lot in the May webinar in the context of helping enhance and support family readiness to move forward in the referral process. When we think about IDEA and what's most important, one thing that's important for families to know is that there are two different programs under IDEA that are relevant for Early Head Start and Head Start families.

This is Part C of IDEA and Part B, Section 619 of IDEA. We'll talk more about the difference between those programs in a moment. An important part of supporting families to navigate during this process is helping them understand these two programs, what the services are, what they might receive, and knowing the difference between these two programs, because they vary in the eligibility criteria, what the services look like, and what the individualized plan for a child or their family looks like.

Thinking about eligibility and what it means to be eligible as an important piece of information for families to know as they embark on the referral and the eligibility evaluation process, what does it mean to be eligible for IDEA services? This will come up a lot. It's the whole point of the eligibility evaluation process. Being eligible simply means that a child has a disability or a delay that requires some specialized services and supports in order for that child to make progress, to develop and learn.

I just mentioned the differences between Part B and Part C. There are several differences, but one of the main differences is in what we call the eligibility criteria. What it takes for a child to become eligible for those services. Part C of IDEA is for children, infants, and toddlers age birth up to age three. For a child to become eligible for Part C services, this is when we're looking at a child who has been assessed, information has been gathered, their development and their functioning has been measured, and the child has been found to have a developmental delay when compared to children their same age.

Or if a child has a diagnosed physical or mental condition that's likely to result in a developmental disability or a developmental delay. There's a third way that infants and toddlers can become eligible for Part C services, and that is through what we call informed clinical opinion from a specialized provider who is participating in the eligibility evaluation. They use what they call their informed clinical opinion to say that a child is eligible and would benefit from Part C services. One important thing to note is that when it comes to IDEA services, how they're implemented, what the eligibility criteria are, this can vary from state to state.

IDEA is a federal law, it's a national law, but some states there's flexibility, with an IDEA to determine different eligibility criteria or to determine how services and where services are provided. It's important to know this basic information about IDEA but remember that IDEA requirements and what it looks like in implementation can vary from state to state and even possibly between different districts and agencies. It's important for us as Head Start staff to learn about the specific requirements and regulations for our state. There is information in the

viewer's guide about where you can look to learn that specific information, not only for IDEA, but your own state.

Back to eligibility, we think about eligibility criteria for IDEA Part B Section 619, which is specifically focused on children ages 3 to 5, preschool age children. The eligibility criteria for Part B Section 619 is different than they are for Part C. To become eligible for Part B Section 619 services under IDEA, that's when a child is evaluated, and they are found to have their educational performance to be adversely affected or impacted by their disability.

An important distinction between Part C and Part B services and eligibility is that under Part B, there are 13 disability categories stated and outlined under IDEA. A child, to be eligible for those Part B services, has to have one of those disabilities that are listed in the 13 federal categories. It has to be shown that that disability impacts the child's development, learning, and educational performance.

For more information about what those 13 categories are for the federal disability categories, see your viewer's guide, also we did a webinar last August, August 2022, called IDEA 101. We've got a link to that recording of that webinar in your viewer's guide. That shares more information about eligibility, but also about some of this basic information about IDEA that we'll be covering and touching on today.

One more note on eligibility. For young children, for children between the ages of three and nine, it's possible for that child to become eligible through a demonstrated developmental delay, even if they don't fall under one of the 13 federal disability categories. That's important and relevant for our Head Start population. That's information about eligibility. An important part of this process is that eligibility evaluation and that series of assessments that we'll talk a lot more about in the upcoming section. Before we get into that specific information, let's go back to our videos.

Let's hear in this first video from a family member who shares some of the concerns that she had going in to this eligibility evaluation process. As you watch this video, reflect on the concerns and the worries that you hear this mom talk about and think about, what other concerns have either you as a family member encountered or have you heard from families that you're partnering with?

[Video begins]

Woman: When I completed my intake, I knew that we were going to have a full developmental evaluation at kinderg. I was excited about that and a little bit nervous because we hadn't really seen — we had seen the same things, but just weren't as concerned as our pediatrician was. I think I was a little nervous going into the evaluation because I was thinking, what else are they going to see that I don't notice as the parent? Something that I really liked about the evaluation process was that kind of as they were going along through their testing, they were kind of making comments to me to let me know, oh, I'm seeing this and I would consider that a

strength. Or I'm seeing this and for a child his age, we sort of expect something to look a little bit different.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: For those of you who were with us in Part 1 of this webinar series for the episode in May, that's something we heard a lot about and talked a lot about was family's knowledge of child development and how a family's knowledge or their questions about development might impact their readiness. We heard that same theme again from this mom who just talked about knowledge of development, not sharing the same concerns, and worry that other concerns about her child's development might come up during the eligibility evaluation process. Let's also hear from Denisha in Dallas, who will share a little bit more about some of the concerns that she and her staff have heard from families as they are about to begin the eligibility evaluation process.

[Video begins]

Denisha: We also get concerns from families about what does this mean? They think, okay, so if my child qualifies, or they're evaluated, and they're diagnosed, is this going to impact them when they go to school? Is this going to prevent them from being able to have, I'm going to put in quotes, the typical learning opportunities within the public education set? I think they have that concern of, well, if they're diagnosed with a disability, does this mean that they're going to be labeled? Or does this mean that they're going to be excluded from different activities? Or does this mean that people are going to think that I'm a bad parent?

[Video ends]

Jennifer: Knowing that every family's experience, every family's concerns, what questions they have will be different, can be helpful for us as program staff to know what some common concerns are, and be able to maybe anticipate some of the resources we might provide, or some of the questions we might answer as we partner with families.

Another thing that we heard when we were talking about what's most important, what's most critical for families to know, and how can Head Start staff partner with and support families as they begin this referral and eligibility process, is what's going to happen during the referral and the eligibility evaluation process. What can I expect during this process, including what's going to happen, when it will happen, and specifically what the family's role is in the steps throughout this process.

Let's break down this referral and eligibility process. The first step is referral. That's when somebody, it might be the family, it might be us as a Head Start agency, contacts an IDEA agency, and requests an evaluation in writing. When there's a request for a child to be evaluated for IDEA services, this is called a referral. Once the IDEA agency receives the referral,



they'll review the referral, the information that's in that referral, and then they'll respond to the family with information about how the agency will proceed. It's important to know that somebody from the IDEA agency might contact the family to have an initial conversation, particularly if the child has been referred to be evaluated for Part C services. That's a step that many Part C agencies will take. That's referral.

The next important step in this process is consent. It's important to know that in order for an evaluation to move forward, to determine if the child is eligible, this is often called an initial evaluation, the IDEA agency needs to provide the parent or the family with a written statement that describes what they're going to evaluate and how the evaluations will take place and what evaluations will be conducted. This written statement is called prior written notice and it's required under IDEA.

There's more information in your viewer's guide and in that IDEA 101 webinar from August 2022. There's more information about prior written notice in those resources. This prior written notice by law needs to have a statement related to the parent's rights under IDEA and specifically related to the parent's rights during this referral and evaluation process. There needs to be information about how families can get more information about these rights and these safeguards. After the IDEA agency provides the prior written notice and before the IDEA agency is able to move forward with this initial evaluation or this eligibility evaluation, the IDEA agency must obtain the parent's written consent to move forward.

The next important step in this process is the evaluation process. Once the family has provided written consent, you'll often hear it called informed consent, then the IDEA agency will move forward with eligibility evaluations. This is a comprehensive developmental evaluation where the IDEA agency staff will gather information from a variety of sources in many ways to measure and look at the child's level of development and the child's functioning. This is important.

The IDEA agency must be comprehensive. They must evaluate the child's areas of strength and need, and they must evaluate the child's functioning and level of development across developmental domains. This evaluation must be conducted by qualified professionals. Usually what we see is a multidisciplinary team. Folks who have expertise in different areas, maybe special education, maybe speech and language, maybe a nurse or another health professional. What they're going to do is observe the child, talk to the people who know the child, including the family, do some assessments themselves, and review records, all to gain a comprehensive picture of the child's level of development and level of functioning.

One thing that's important to note, under IDEA, it says that during the eligibility evaluation process, the IDEA team must consider multiple sources of information. That includes information that's provided by the child's family or others who are familiar with the child, including us as Head Start or Early Head Start staff. One more important thing to note about this evaluation process is that evaluations and assessments must be culturally appropriate, and they need to take place in the child or the family's home language, unless it's clearly not feasible to do that.

The last step in this overall process is an eligibility meeting. Once the evaluations are complete, the IDEA agency will write a report. It's called the Initial Evaluation Report. This report includes information from all the assessments that were conducted, information that was gathered from reviewing existing records, and any other information that the child's family or team may have provided. A meeting will be held to review this report and to discuss whether or not the child is eligible based on these evaluations, whether or not the child is eligible for IDEA services.

A couple important things to note about this eligibility meeting, is that it should include the family, representatives from the IDEA agency, and any other professionals or people that the family wants to invite and include in that meeting. During this meeting, the team will review the report, discuss the results, and then make a determination about whether or not the child is eligible or not to receive those IDEA services. Thinking again about what's important for families to know about what to expect during that referral and eligibility process.

Another thing that we heard Denise talk about in that first video was understanding who's who. That's another important piece of information for families to have before they begin to navigate this referral and eligibility process. We know that families will likely interact with many different professionals from the IDEA agency during these various touch points that we just described. Consent, evaluation, the eligibility determination meeting. Not knowing who these people are, having maybe somebody different contact them or communicate with them during all these checkpoints. This can be confusing and overwhelming for families.

Not knowing who these folks are, but also not knowing what the family's role is in interacting with them and advocating for their child during this process. We think it's important as we're thinking about supporting family's navigation and advocacy, it's important to help them know what to expect in terms of the various people that they might interact with, including who's who in this process and how do I interact with them. Who's who and who contacts the family and who interacts with the family will vary depending on the child's age, depending on the specific agency that the child's referred to, and then of course the nature of the concerns about the child's health or development.

They might hear from a family resources coordinator or a service coordinator. They might hear from a case manager. They might hear from a psychologist, a nurse, or another medical provider. They might hear from a special educator or a speech language pathologist. They might hear from a physical or occupational therapist or other professionals, but these are some common ones that families may interact with. It's important to help families understand that they're a critical member of their child's team beginning with this referral and evaluation process, and an important step in supporting families' advocacy is helping them figure out what their role is and supporting their communication with these various professionals.

As a valued member and central member of the child's team, we know that during the specific assessment and evaluation process, the family should actively participate in that to the degree that they're comfortable and support that evaluation by sharing information about the family's priorities, their resources, or their concerns, by sharing information or asking questions about

the child's development and how they function in different environments, in different activities, and by sharing other information that they feel is important for the team to know.

Your viewer's guide has a whole section on families participating as team members and has some great resources from some of our partner TA centers around how do we as professionals, how do we as Head Start staff support families as they learn to navigate their participation, their communication with IDEA professionals.

The last thing that we wanted to highlight as critical information for families to know as they embark on this referral and evaluation process is what families' rights are under IDEA and particularly what families' rights are during this referral, evaluation, and eligibility determination process. To highlight, families have lots of rights under IDEA and your viewer's guide has more information about where to find more information and more resources around families' rights under IDEA.

A few key rights that we wanted to highlight and make sure that Head Start staff are aware of so that families can be aware of these is the right to confidentiality. It's a concern for many families about the assessments that are that are conducted, information that's collected, a child's records. Confidentiality is a key right for families under IDEA.

Another important right is to receive an explanation of the procedural safeguards that I explained a little while ago. Procedural safeguards are a section in IDEA that is designed to protect the rights of children who are eligible for IDEA services and their families. Procedural safeguards also provide processes and resources that can be used if there are disputes or disagreements between families and an IDEA agency.

Another important right is to receive that prior written notice that I described a few slides ago before any meeting or any event takes place. Prior written notice is a document that the IDEA agency must give to the family before any change is made or any action is taken by the IDEA agency or before any action that the IDEA agency decides not to take or refuses to take. This includes eligibility assessments, other evaluations, placement decisions, and services that are provided. Prior written notice must be provided to families in writing at multiple points throughout a child's receipt of IDEA services.

Participation in meetings. We've referred to this a few times, but that's an important right that families have. Not only their own participation, but participation by others that the family wants to include during those meetings throughout these processes. Another important right is that the parent's preferred language or preferred mode of communication must be used during this meeting and that the family provides informed consent.

That's a high-level look at a few key rights that families have under IDEA and your viewer's guide has more information about where you can find further resources about family rights. We talked about some key information and key resources, questions that families might have as

they begin this referral and eligibility process. Now let's talk specifically about some strategies that Head Start staff and Early Head Start staff can use as they're supporting families to navigate these processes.

One important thing to point out is that even before a Head Start staff makes a referral to an IDEA agency, the Head Start program must obtain consent from the family before making that referral. That's important to note. It's also important, other steps that the staff can take or strategies that the staff can use to partner, have those ongoing conversations, use those relationship-based strategies that we described in Part 1 of the webinar series to ensure that families understand the evaluation process, the referral process, what's going to happen.

Likewise, partner with them to understand what questions they might have and what concerns they might have. When the family receives the eligibility report and before the eligibility meeting happens after the assessments take place, an important step that Head Start staff can take is to partner with the families to make sure that they understand the information that's in that eligibility report. Find out what questions they might have and how you can support their participation in that eligibility meeting.

Another important step that Head Start staff can take is to collaborate with the IDEA agency during that ongoing eligibility evaluation process to provide information that the family might think is important. Support that comprehensive evaluation process and provide a full picture of the child's development and functioning. Collaborate with families on an ongoing basis throughout the many touch points. This evaluation process can take a while.

We heard Denisha say, continuing to proactively have those ongoing touch points, those ongoing conversations throughout that process to make sure that families understand what's going to happen next, what's already happened, and what questions or concerns they might have. Supporting family-to-family connections. We'll hear a little bit more about this, but Denise mentioned that in that first video. That's something that we hear a lot from families is being introduced to having the opportunity to connect with families of other families of children with disabilities is a valuable resource. Head Start staff can help facilitate those connections. There's lots of information in your viewer's guide.

Lisa said at the beginning, in order to help support families' navigation and advocacy, we as Head Start staff need to make sure that we know about IDEA and that we're clear on what these different processes and regulations are and how they impact our work in Head Start. Your viewer's guide has lots more information and links to resources to help you feel as confident and comfortable with this information about IDEA as possible. Before we move on to our next section about supporting family advocacy, let's hear from Denisha one more time, our Disability Services Manager in Dallas, to hear about some specific strategies that her staff use to support families throughout the referral and eligibility processes.

[Video begins]

Denisha: I think the first step is making sure they're involved throughout the process. In our program, whenever a child is referred, we hold a staffing meeting. In that meeting, it's the parents, it's our admin staff within our centers, our inclusion specialists who are the disability support staff, and explain to the parent what is about to happen, helping them know, kind of like I said earlier, who may call them, what they may ask for.

Even after the parent has left the meeting and the child is referred, staff still keep in contact with the parent, checking in to say, "Do you have any questions?" Making sure that they were comfortable with the specialists and professionals who came into the home. Because we have had that happen, where the agency we referred to, the parent later had some concerns about just what took place. Making sure that they know that we're there to support them, and they have the right to ask questions and to say I don't really understand why you're doing this, or what's happening. Making sure they're involved in that process throughout, from beginning to end.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: Let's talk about in addition to helping families learn to navigate the system, learning to become an advocate is important. It's important for families, as Lisa mentioned, on an ongoing basis. But also, as families are introduced to this IDEA system. Thinking about, if a family or a child is found eligible for IDEA services, the family will need to continue to support their child, navigate the system, and advocate for different services.

Lisa: I was going to chime in here and say advocacy has many benefits for children, benefits for the families, and benefits for programs, schools, and communities. It's especially important to remember that one of the great parts about being a Head Start parent and family member, is you learn early on how to advocate for your child's development, for the education, you understand the system as we've talked about already. That supports transitions that take place from Head Start into kindergarten age programs. There's just many benefits to having those advocacy skills. I think we have a video that we're going to watch.

Jennifer: Let's look. Thank you, Lisa, for providing that overview about benefits of advocacy. Your viewer's guide has lots more information about benefits of advocacy for parents and for children. Let's look here at what a family has to say about what they've found to be the benefits as they've learned to find their way as advocates for their child.

[Video begins]

Denise: Despite seeing my daughter in the NICU, and at times with tubes in her, I believe that she had a better future than what was happening in the moment. As I fought with the school district, I believed that she could do better, and she had an opportunity to advance over all of our expectations. Today, almost 24 years later, because my daughter is older, she's 24, I see the beautiful, confident young lady that she turned out to be. There are certain things that you can't teach children, that children learn by observing and just you supporting them. I truly believe my daughter is who she is with all the confidence she has because I believed first.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: I love hearing from that mom about not only the benefits for her family, but the benefits for her child of advocacy and the example that that set for her family. Lisa, do you want to talk a little bit about some strategies that staff can use to support family advocacy?

Lisa: Some of the strategies that you see here, and obviously it's planned, and that's creating that vision and developing those goals and a plan for how to reach those goals leading by example. Acting as that role model and communicating, which is that active communication and active listening, which we take for granted, we assume that in our conversations and meetings, we're always actively engaged in and listening, but that's such a key strategy for thinking about advocacy.

The negotiation, which is including everyone in making those decisions, when possible, especially families and parents, and then valuing feelings. We talked about that in our first webinar, knowing that families will have different feelings based upon their experiences and their circumstances. We want to value those feelings and emotions of all people involved, especially our families and their parents, and then motivate and inspire others. Engaging in ways that boost their enthusiasm and their confidence about completing tasks and achieving these goals.

All thinking about this process and eligibility and what they want and hopes and dreams for their child. Being mindful of that and then being positive really having that positive outlook and that flexibility throughout this process is helpful when it comes to supporting advocacy skills. Finally, accepting those mistakes. Seeing mistakes as an opportunity of growth, which I think was mentioned in one of our videos really knowing that this process is very challenging, there's barriers, but knowing that when mistakes are made, we look at that as opportunities to grow and learn together.

Jennifer: Thank you, Lisa, for highlighting those specific strategies. We know that family advocacy makes a difference, both for the family and for the child, and there are great benefits. Now we're going to look, we're going to have a couple more videos. We're going to look at a perspective of a mom and what was helpful for her, not only as she learned to develop her own advocacy skills, but she's a parent of a child with a disability, she's also a family advocate. She's going to share some unique perspectives about partnering with families to help develop advocacy skills based on both of those roles that she's played.

[Video begins]

Michelle: I know working with Head Start, both Early Head Start home visitors, as well as Head Start, the partnerships that the home visitors and teachers have in Head Start is critical because they help families and draw families out to find their voice. I happen to have a voice. I didn't always know where or when to use it. By that partnership with either early intervention, with some of the providers we've had, and then the school district, it was helpful. We needed to find the support.

I found that by working with the people around me, by them asking me questions, and by me asking them questions, we could work together. The other thing I would say is, and I do this in my work with families all the time, and now I find myself asking this question is, what is my role? If I'm invited to something, what's my role in these meetings? What's my role with my daughter during the early intervention evaluation? What was my role on the school team and my responsibilities? Because I very much believe in the power of family and professional partnerships, and I was asking about the role. For me, these things all helped support my advocacy journey and who I am now, and ultimately, who my daughter is now.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: I love that perspective on not only what shaped her advocacy skills, but how her advocacy impacted her daughter. I think that's a beautiful example of the benefits of advocacy. Let's look at one more video that focuses on how Head Start staff can partner with families as they grow their advocacy skills.

[Video begins]

Denisha: Looks a little bit different because parents may be apprehensive, thinking, well, they're doing this for my child. They're providing this, I just should be thankful and just be happy and just be okay with whatever is being provided. At the same time, that's true, but you still have the right to ask questions. You still have the right to know what's happening. With that, what we do is we try to do a lot of peer education and educating our parents about not just the referral process, but about rights, about questions to ask, and really prepping them with some barriers that they may encounter, really being honest and in reality, and telling them this is what we want to happen. We want your child to be fully included. We want the school just to say, great, yes, but also letting them know you may encounter these barriers.

These are some tools that you could use to support you in overcoming them. We will have ongoing parent education meetings with our family advocates, they have parent cafes where parents can come together who have children with disabilities, and they can all talk together about the different obstacles they face or different questions they have, or maybe one parent may even share a success of how they were able to advocate and get supports for their children.

[Video ends]

Jennifer: I love that perspective on not only what to focus on, how to navigate specific barriers that might come up, but also some nice tools and strategies that the staff use to provide that information. Those ongoing parent education sessions, and I love the idea of those parent cafes to intentionally connect parents of disabilities with one another.

Lisa: I love the parent cafes. You hear so many great things, outcomes from those conversations and meetings. As we're starting to close, let's just think a little bit and talk a little bit about the strategies for that continued growth of family advocates. You just want to make sure that we're

convening meetings that's very convenient for families and being mindful of their schedules trying to stay away from the tech jargon that comes along with this IDEA process. It can be overwhelming for parents.

Being mindful of that and clear communication focusing on those family aspirations and those goals. Checking in and asking what it is they want for their family and for their child's growth and development and around school readiness. Reflecting with families what's important to them as they go through the changes and what they want to see in the future. I think those are all some important strategies to remember. I think we also have a resource, Helping Families Be Full Team Members, that's going to be helpful. You can find it in your guide.

Jennifer: Thanks for that reminder, Lisa. We have a short time and so much great information to cover. We wanted to utilize that viewer's guide to expand on information. We are at time. One thing that we didn't get to, but that's important, is what happens after that eligibility determination meeting if a child is found to be eligible for IDEA services. That's not what this webinar was about, but we have some information about what resources, what information, what questions families might have as they move forward once their child is determined to be eligible for IDEA services, and how program staff can support families during those ongoing processes, whether that's the IEP or IFSP meeting, participating in ongoing services.

The August 2022 — that IDEA 101 webinar that we keep referring to, what that webinar was focused on, is how can program staff partner with families and support families as families navigate those IDEA services that their child is eligible for. Definitely take a look at that prior webinar recording, which is on the ECLKC. That brings us to time. I can't believe it. I feel like this hour and one minute has flown by. Thank you so much to everybody for your questions, for your thoughts, and your perspectives in the Q&A. If there are questions that we didn't get to, we can follow up with you, and we encourage you to, as Lisa said early on, to join us in the disabilities and inclusion community on MyPeers to ask those questions. We'll be there.

Brittany and I are in the MyPeers community regularly to provide information, but you have so many colleagues who have a wealth of information and have resources to share that can support you with those specific questions that you might have. With that, one last thank you to our participants, to our Q&A supporters, Brittany and Tam and Katie, who I know had their fingers flying in the Q&A, and to Lisa and Alexis for joining me here today. Please mark your calendars to join us for our next inclusion series webinar, which will be in early 2024, on February 13th, 2024.

During that webinar, we are going to be talking about making ongoing database decisions to support highly individualized instruction for young children with disabilities and suspected delays. We're going to highlight in that webinar a brand-new resource that we have coming out, an inclusion mobile app. It's not out yet. It will be out soon. In that webinar in February, we'll talk about how to use the app to support that ongoing database decision-making. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, as always, for joining us and for all the work that you do on behalf of children and families. It's so important and it doesn't go unnoticed. Thank you and have a great afternoon.



Lisa: Thank you. Bye.