Using Family-Specific Language

Supporting school-age children with special needs, disabilities, and exceptionalities is a wonderful opportunity to embrace diverse families in your community. You may hear different language or terms from families when they describe their child’s condition or ability level. Some families will use “special needs” or “disability.” Others will use specific terms such as, “He has anxiety” or “My child has dyslexia.” As children with disabilities grow older, the situations they and their families face often change, which brings both new challenges and celebrations to their lives.

It’s important to take your cues from each individual family. Some families will be eager to share updates and suggestions they learn from doctors, teachers, and specialists. If a family describes a recommendation to you as, “helpful for children with attention disorders,” it is acceptable to mirror this same language as long as you are comfortable doing so. It is best practice to use person-first language. For example, “child with autism” is preferred over “autistic child.” Even though it is most important to think of children first as individuals (and not to define them by their conditions or traits), there may be times when you need to ask families questions about how to best support their school-age children. It can be difficult to avoid using medical terms and jargon during these conversations, and you may need to directly address their child’s condition or ability level. If you are unsure of what to say, ask the family how they prefer you speak about their child’s needs or condition. This shows the family that their input is valued, and it builds trust in your partnership with them.

Case Scenario:

Liam is an eight-year-old in your school-age program born with moderate hearing loss in both ears. Liam has a set of hearing aids but does not consistently wear them. On days when program staff notice that Liam is not wearing hearing aids, Liam often says, “forgot them at home” or “couldn’t find them this morning.” Other times, Liam has the hearing aids, but they need new batteries and don’t work.

Liam’s ability to follow directions and interact with peers is significantly better when wearing working hearing aids. Liam already needs support with peer interactions, and challenges in this area are worsened when hearing is impacted. Although bullying is being addressed at school and is not an issue in your program, Liam’s parents have shared that bullying has been a problem at school. They feel that Liam’s time in your program has positively impacted Liam’s ability to make friends. You feel the need to discuss Liam’s inconsistent use of hearing aids with Liam’s parents to best support their child’s learning and friendships.
How will you initiate this conversation with Liam’s family? Think about how to be sensitive to the fact that the family has been supporting their child through difficulties with bullying. Record some notes on how you would discuss this situation with Liam’s family, and reflect on your thoughts with a coach, trainer, or administrator.