

NJ Family Engagement Hub

START Statewide Technical Assistance and Resources Team



Building Trust in Special Education Partnerships

Practical ways families, parent groups, and special services leaders can strengthen relationships. Strong partnerships don't happen by chance. They are built through trust, shared purpose, and a commitment to improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Every family deserves to feel welcomed, valued, and included in their child's school community. This tool can help school staff, PTA/PTO leaders, SEPAG members, and other family partners reflect on current practices and identify opportunities to strengthen connections with all families.

7 Ways to Build Trust

Build Relationships Before You Need Them	Don't wait for a concern or disagreement to connect. Regular communication creates a stronger foundation for working together when challenges arise.	**Try this:** Create opportunities for parent leaders and special services staff to connect outside of problem-solving conversations.
Recognize What Everyone Brings	Families bring lived experience, knowledge of their children, and perspectives from the broader family community. Educators and administrators bring professional expertise and knowledge of schools, programs, and systems.	**Remember:** Trust grows when these different forms of knowledge are **recognized and valued.**
Listen to Understand	Listening is more than waiting for your turn to speak. It means trying to understand another person's experience and point of view—even when it differs from your own.	**Try asking:** *"Can you help me understand what is most important to you about this?"*
Communicate Openly and Clearly	Trust is harder to build when people are unsure about what is happening or why. Share information, explain decisions, ask questions, clarify misunderstandings, and communicate changes whenever possible.	**Remember:** Two-way communication means everyone has opportunities to both **share** and **listen.**
Focus on Shared Interests	Families and school leaders may sometimes arrive with different ideas about what should happen. Looking beneath those positions to understand why something matters can open the door to more collaborative solutions.	**Instead of:** *"Whose solution is right?"* **Try:** *"What are we both trying to accomplish?"*

Follow Through	Trust is strengthened through consistency. When commitments are made, follow through. When circumstances change, communicate that too.	**Try this:** Sharing an update, responding to a question, completing an agreed-upon next step, or simply saying, *"I haven't forgotten about this."*
Make Room for Disagreement	Strong partnerships aren't partnerships without disagreement. Different perspectives are expected—and can even make the work stronger.	**Remember:** The goal isn't to avoid difficult conversations. It's to create enough **trust** that people can have those conversations **respectfully,** stay focused on **shared interests**, and continue **working together** afterward.

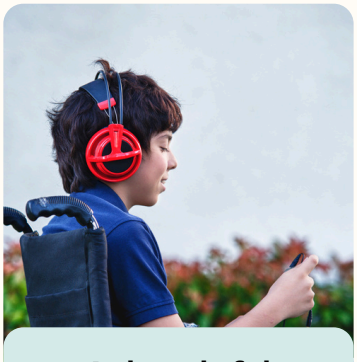
A Quick Partnership Check

Every so often, ask one another:

- What are we doing that is helping build trust?
- Where could we communicate or collaborate more effectively?
- Are we making space for different perspectives?
- Are we following through on our commitments to one another?
- What is one small thing we can do next to strengthen our partnership?

Keep in Mind

Trust is built in small moments.



A thoughtful response.



A question asked with curiosity.



A different perspective is genuinely heard.



A success celebrated together.

Over time, those moments create the relationships that allow families, parent groups, and Special Services leaders to work together, even when the work is difficult.

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