

Libby's Bridges

Libby is a self-acknowledged advocate for her son. She jokes that his teachers, both at the school district special education program, and at his community-based child care center, probably say "Oh, no!" when they see her coming. Libby is a well-educated parent with a background in general and special education. She is finishing her second master's degree and is considering starting a doctoral program. Her son, Charlie, is 3 years old. He has been attending a community-based child care center for two years now, first in the toddler room and now in the young preschool room. He has also been attending the school district Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) program for two years, first in the toddler room (Early Intervention) and now in the preschool room (ECSE).

Currently, Charlie receives speech therapy through the school district and occupational therapy at a private agency. Charlie has sensory issues, food sensitivities, and apraxia, a communication disorder. However, Charlie animatedly "talks" frequently, and when Libby models speech for him slowly, he can be intelligible. Charlie is on the small side, and is physically "soft" with low muscle tone. Libby and his teachers describe him a "cuddly", and he can be calmed when he is upset by hugging him or holding him and swaying. Libby worries that because he is "cute and cuddly", and still has looks like a toddler, that his teachers and therapists will forget that he has not met the typical 3 year old milestones.

At home, his parents use a weighted blanket, and recently the OT has been using a swinging technique, which happens just before speech therapy. The speech therapist says that she has noticed that when Charlie swings prior to speech, he seems more focused. Libby believes that Charlie's diagnosis should be Autism Spectrum Disorder and will push for this diagnosis as he gets closer to going into kindergarten. She said that the ECSE teacher seemed surprised that Libby "wanted" him to be diagnosed with Autism. She said,

Do I want my son to have Autism? No! But if all the indicators are there, then I want him to have the right interventions. If we keep ignoring the signs, then he won't get the services he needs. Someone with training in autism is going to "get" Charlie better.

During Charlie's toddler year at the ECSE program, the school district, responding to the need to provide services in natural environments, decided to start home visits. Libby requested that instead of home visits, Rachelle, the ECSE teacher, come to his community child care instead. Libby orchestrated much of the process for this to happen. In a series of emails and conversations with staff from both programs, she ensured that the Charlie's toddler teacher, Lisa, was invited to the IFSP addendum meeting. She also arranged for Lisa to observe Charlie in the ECSE toddler room. Rachelle then began to come to the community child care center once a week to observe and work with Charlie. Rachelle continued to come to the community child care center for weekly visits for about half of Charlie's toddler year. Charlie continued to attend the ECSE program once a week during this same period.

Rachelle and Lisa both described Libby as “intense” when it came to getting Charlie’s needs met, but both appreciated her as a concerned mom who wanted what was best for her child. Lisa said that Libby had been “extremely open” with all information pertaining to Charlie. She felt that although it was sometimes hard to keep up with all the information and terminology, she felt it was easier than dealing with parents who were not willing to consider that their child might have a special need. Both Rachelle and Lisa were glad that Libby had helped bridge their two programs. Lisa said of Rachelle, “She just fits in naturally when she comes to the childcare center. She just gets down on the floor and plays. She really pays attention to Charlie, but she also tries to draw in the other children”. Lisa also said that Rachelle helped her understand some of the special education terminology.

Rachelle also enjoyed her weekly visit to the childcare center. She really appreciated being able to observe “typically developing” children because she spent so much time as a special education teacher with only children who had developmental delays. She said that she really liked getting to see Charlie in a different setting, and it helped validate Libby’s comments that Charlie did act differently in the two settings. Rachelle said that the childcare environment was more natural, and “Charlie is more outgoing, happier and seems more comfortable than I see him in the ECSE program”.

Rachelle, Lisa and Libby all three commented that they appreciated the opportunity to touch base in person on the day that Rachelle came to the childcare center. Instead of Libby having to relay information from one teacher and program to another, when Libby came in with Charlie on that morning, they had a brief time to share information and ask each other questions.

Charlie is now in the 3-5 year old ECSE program, and the school district special education teachers do not visit or consult with the EC teachers at the childcare center. Libby continues to try to help Charlie’s two programs connect. Libby made sure to invite Sam, Charlie’s community-based preschool teacher, to the IEP meeting in early fall. She also provided a copy of the IEP to Sam and his teaching partner, Kelly, during parent teacher conferences at the childcare center. Libby is very verbal about her view that she does not think that all of the activities that Charlie does at the ECSE program are “developmentally appropriate” and she feels that the community-based program is more child-centered. However, she feels Charlie does need the services provided by the school district, and will continue to have him attend both programs. She feels positive about the elementary school he will eventually attend, based on what she has learned about their efforts to develop inclusive classrooms for all children.

Discussion Questions:

Why do you think it was important to Libby to bring together Charlie’s teachers from the different settings?

What were the positive outcomes of the bridges Libby helped to build?

For Charlie?

For Libby?

For the EC teachers?

For the ECSE teachers?