

As a family member, it is important that your voice is heard at the table whenever anything having to do with services for children with disabilities is being discussed. Families are the experts on their children, and they know what works and what doesn't work in terms of services for their son or daughter. Family engagement and participation in decision-making are critical when it comes to improving early childhood programs and achieving better child and family outcomes. It is also important that the family voice is representative of the family's culture as it pertains to the child's needs.

What does it mean to be a "stakeholder"?

A stakeholder is a person who is affected by and cares about how decisions and policies are made. Families are critical when it comes to decisions related to their children's education and special education services. Stakeholders may include:

- Family members
- State agency staff
- Local administrative and leadership staff
- Legislators

Stakeholders play a role in setting state and local program policy and determining budgets at the state and local levels. They need to hear from families so they can consider those views when policies, priorities, and budgets are being set. This is a process called "shared decision-making" that allows for many voices to be heard before decisions are made.

One way that families can influence decisions is to be prepared to tell their family stories. Being able to convey experiences through a brief presentation at a school board meeting, legislative committee hearing, or other public forum helps inform policy makers and gives them a true understanding of how what they do affects families. Policy makers and school officials will remember personal stories longer than facts and figures.

Opportunities for involvement

At the school district or local level, there are many ways that you, as a parent, can be involved. These include:

- Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAPs) (50 percent of members must be parents)
- Head Start Parent Advisory Boards
- Preschool or Child Care Center Advisory Boards

At the regional level, parents can be part of the decision-making around how to find families whose children may be eligible for early childhood special education services.

Mississippi State Interagency Coordinating Committees (MSICC) must include parent representatives. At the state level, parents can participate in a Governor appointed council whose role is to "advise and assist" the Mississippi State Department of Health in implementing the Part C (early intervention) system in Mississippi.