

INTERVIEWING FAMILIES

When educators or other professionals attempt to understand what is happening with a child and undertake an assessment of a child who may have CVI, they will usually obtain information from three sources: interviews with family members and others who know the child well, observation of the child, and a direct assessment of the child. As already noted, an interview with the parents often forms the basis for the rest of the assessment. The interview may take place during one or several sessions, and observations of the child may begin at the same time. Whether the professional visits the home or the parent and child come to the assessor's office, there are a number of steps the professional can take to ensure a more successful interview. The following are some suggestions to make the interview go smoothly:

- Come disarmed, with as few professional trappings as possible. Too many forms, folders, or charts may interfere with establishing a rapport with the parents. Inform the parents if you need to take notes.
- Introduce yourself and communicate that you are sincerely interested in the family-by saying, for example, "Thank you for coming. I'm so happy you're here," or "I'm so glad to meet you."
- Begin by making the parent and child comfortable and reassuring them. Make some small talk (practice this, if necessary, beforehand).
- Acknowledge all the family members who are present, and make a special effort to relate to the child who is about to be evaluated.
- Ask if it is all right to have observers, if any are present.
- Try to let the child know that you enjoy his or her company. Touch, talk to, or compliment the child. Parents will appreciate your attention to him or her.

While the assessor is engaged in these preliminaries, he or she can begin to observe the child and note the following:

- Is the child demonstrating visual curiosity?
- Is the child staring at the lights?
- Is the child holding a special object? If so, notice its properties, such as color, complexity of pattern, or movement.
- How is the child positioned?
- Does the child have any medical equipment?
- Is the child alert, fatigued, or anxious?

It is important for the educator or other professional to be aware, as he or she speaks with family members and throughout the sessions, of how the discussion is affecting the family, and to respond accordingly. As always, when dealing with families of children who have visual impairments, it is important to understand that they will be concerned for their child and may be upset about the prospect of confronting a new diagnosis. Parents of children who may have CVI may have experienced the frustration of having their unique knowledge of their child, disregarded and even disparaged. They may be highly concerned about their child's ability to see only to have been told, "Her eyes are fine." Thus, it is important to acknowledge the parents; importance as a source of trustworthy information and to be sensitive to their need for information and support. Other suggestions for interacting with parents and family members include the following:

- Be aware of cultural differences. For example, don't place high value on the development of eye contact in children who are from cultures in which making eye contact is a sign of disrespect.
- Try not to be afraid of the emotional effects of the interview, on either the parents or yourself. It can be helpful for professionals to have a trusted colleague who is willing to listen and share the feelings evoked by families' emotionally charged stories.
- Know when to touch, hug, and make physical contact, and when not to. Let the parents provide the cues or take the lead.
- Give parents credit for the progress their children make-for example, learning to eat with a spoon, taking steps using a walker, or reading his or her name.

When parents are comfortable, the more formal section of the interview can begin:

- Ask parents why they have come and what are they hoping to gain from these sessions.
- Allow the family members to tell their story, even if you have already reviewed the medical records.
- Make note of anything you need to add to the child's medical and educational history.
- Don't correct parent's perceptions or terminology unless what is being discussed will result in a critical misunderstanding that may affect the child.

In the interviews with parents, as well as with teachers, caregivers, or others who are familiar with the child, the assessor will want to make sure the following information is covered in regard to visual behaviors:

- What is the child's medical background?
- What does the eye care specialist report?
- What are the parents' and teachers' concerns?
- What does the student prefer to look at?
- Does the student have a preferred color?
- When is the student most visually alert?
- Does the student look directly into faces?
- Does the student notice things that move more than things that are stable?
- Does the student seem to "look through" rather than directly at objects?

Reproduced by permission of the publisher from Christine Roman-Lantzy, *Cortical Visual Impairment: An Approach to Assessment and Intervention*, copyright © 2007, AFB Press, New York. All rights reserved.