

## Family Systems Transcript

Hello! Welcome to the Friends of Tennessee's Babies with Special Needs website. We're so glad that you have joined us. My name is Robin.

Since we are lucky enough to work alongside families every day, it is important that we understand about **Family Systems**. This important research is being conducted by Ann Turnbull at the University of Kansas. This work is based on the premise that we respect that all families are different. The **Family Systems Approach** focuses on the entire family and is composed of four components: Family Characteristics, Family Interactions, Family Functions and Family Life-cycle.

Let's take a look at **Family Characteristics**. Families come in different sizes and can be made up of teen moms, grandparents, single dads, foster parents and many other combinations. They have different religious and cultural beliefs which can influence a family's views on their child's disability. Families can experience poverty, addictions and abuse. The **Family Systems Approach** says that we will respect that all families are different and that the same things will not work for all families. **Family Characteristics** help us to understand that we need to honor the uniqueness of each family.

Next, let's talk about **Family Interactions**. This refers to all the different relationships within families. Having a child with a disability sends ripples throughout the family. If possible, grandparents need to understand the disability because their support can be critical for the family. Family interactions involve marital relationships, sibling relationships (which in the family life-cycle, can be the longest relationship with the child with the disability over a lifetime), interactions with friends and neighbors and of course, the relationship between the parent and the child. The **Family Systems Approach** says that all relationships are important and that the best way to support a child with a disability is to make sure that all these relationships are vibrant. It's also critical that, if possible, the child with the disability does not only take from, but gives back to relationships.

**Family Function** begins by looking at a family's daily life. Economics, daily care, recreation, socialization, self-definition, affection and education are all functions of a family system. As an Early Interventionist who works with children and families this is an area that we can impact significantly. Each time that a professional intervenes with a family they have the ability to affect family function. Because education is our main focus, we sometimes give the impression to families that it is the most important function of the family. We must remember that it is only one of seven family functions and if we are asking a parent to focus on education then they must take away time from other functions of the family. That is another reason to integrate educational focus into the other functions of the family throughout the everyday routine.

**Family Life-cycle** refers to the changing needs of families as they go through life's various stages. The needs of a family with a very young child with a disability are very different than their needs when the child is a teen or adult. Interventionists can help the family look ahead by planning realistic objectives in terms of a child's future needs. A great example of this is helping families look at the transition process to services as the child approaches their third birthday. We need to remember that families will be with

their child for a long, long time. Ann Turnbull suggests that we need to help them look at the “whole marathon” and help them build strategies to not burn out or give up. Remember that a marathon runner does not sprint the first five or six miles of the marathon and expect to make it to the end. Sometimes as Early Interventionists we encourage the family to “sprint” because we know that we are done when the child turns three, but the family’s time with that child is just beginning. So the more we can help families understand resilience, the more we are going to help them in the long run.

As you reflect on the information that I have shared today, consider trying the following: identify one aspect of the **Family Systems Approach** that you are currently using. What is one aspect that you would like to incorporate into your work with families? Think about how and when you will do that.

Best of luck as you use your knowledge of family systems to enhance the effectiveness of your home visits. Thank you for playing such an important role in the lives of our babies. Because remember, babies can’t wait.