

## **Family Support for Families Who Have Children with Disabilities**

by Pam Miller, Family Support Services Coordinator

Family Support Services in the Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services at the Maryland State Department of Education is based on the strong philosophical foundation that reinforces parents as full partners in the Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) process, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, and as significant sources of support for one another. Family Support Services at the State and local level assist parents in their efforts to actively participate in the early intervention system and/or the special education system, and to engage in activities that promote family life in the community. With clear research that links family involvement to better developmental and educational outcomes for children, Family Support Services is an integral part of the entire education system (0-21) in Maryland. In each local jurisdiction, parent coordinators (parents of children with disabilities themselves) and professionals work together to provide family support services through three different program components – Family Support Network (FSN), Preschool Partners (PP) and Partners for Success (PFS).

The **Family Support Network** component is for parents/families of children with disabilities (birth-3) who are participating in their local early intervention system. Many families of young children with disabilities benefit from family-to-family support and from a network of resources to help them access information pertinent to their child's disability and family circumstance. In addition to the above resources, FSN Coordinators assist parents/families in understanding the IFSP process.

**Preschool Partners** is the bridge between early intervention services and the preschool special education system. The goal of this family support component is to help create a seamless system of supports during the preschool years as children and families are experiencing many changes. Preschool Partners coordinators help families with other early childhood transitions, such as the transition from preschool to kindergarten, from kindergarten to first grade, and/or from childcare programs to the public school system. Preschool Partners provide ongoing support to families of children 3 through 5, maintaining the connection with the local early intervention system, as well as fostering new connections among families, preschool programs, and community services.

**Partners for Success** centers are a part of each local school system in Maryland and serve professionals and parents of all children and youth with disabilities, ages 3 through 21. The primary goal of PFS centers is the provision of knowledge and the development of essential skills fundamental to parents and professionals working together as equal partners in the educational decision making process. PFS coordinators seek to increase parental involvement in the special education decision making process through information and training (particularly with regard to the IEP process); provide information and resources about disabilities and community services; and assist families in resolving concerns by increasing collaborative relationships. Most local PFS centers have a resource library available to parents and professionals.

The Statewide Family Support Services Coordinator is Pam Miller, and she can be reached by calling 1-800-535-0182.