

How Can Educators Effectively Involve Families in Anti-Bias Efforts?

Early Childhood Question Corner

Incorporating family members into early childhood program's anti-bias efforts is integral to its success. When children see their teachers value their families' lives, they develop pride. They also have an opportunity to learn about other children's families and the diversity inherent in them. Family members can be from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, speak multiple languages and include an assortment of ages and abilities. Family configuration varies: some children live with two parents, some live with a grandparent. Some children travel back and forth regularly between families. Some live in large, extended families. Others have never met their grandparents. Some children may live in foster care. Others may not have legal resident status.

As important as it is to include families, it can be difficult. Many working family members cannot participate in program activities during the day. Some don't speak English. Some children have learned their prejudices at home, and their parents aren't open to new points of view. Some adult family members may have been raised to avoid interfering with the teacher, as a sign of respect. Don't be easily discouraged—even the best efforts to include families may not be successful, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep trying.

Families can be involved in a variety of ways. But whatever the way, be sure that it begins with respect, and that every family feels welcome. All families want their children to be happy, healthy and successful. When they see that teachers want the same, they will be likely to participate in a relationship.

Here are some things for early childhood educators to consider when interacting with children's families.

Get Off to a Good Start

Get to know families right away. You might send a letter home or make phone calls to introduce yourself to children's families. Talk to families when they drop their children off and pick children up. Find out any questions or concerns they might have as they give you the responsibility for caring for their child.

Work with the Real Experts

Look to families first for information about their children. Remember, parents and other caregivers are the real experts about their children. Family members can provide important insight into children's behavior, especially regarding exploration of strategies to resolve sensitive issues. Be sure you are willing to listen.

Include All Families Regularly

Develop a plan that will include all children's families on a regular basis. Try to think creatively as you plan events that will appeal to the interests of a variety of family members. Consider one educator's inventive solution. She planned an evening activity where she showed families how to make cupcakes and distributed recipes. The response was overwhelming—more families attended the cupcake-making demonstration than usually attend parent-teacher conferences.

Encourage Cultural Sharing

Offer frequent opportunities for families to share information about cultures. With these efforts, you should go beyond the "food and festivals" approach. You might ask families to teach their children a lullaby that they sang when the children were babies. Children are especially interested in learning different games, rhymes, etc., that family members played when they were children. Find out about

the special talents of different family members, and encourage families to share their talents with children.

Make Sure Everyone Understands

Find out the primary language spoken in each child's family, and, if possible, the reading abilities of family members. Have a plan for contacting all families. It might mean getting help translating materials that are sent home, simplifying some, or making phone calls to family members who don't know how to read. It might mean including someone to act as a translator during discussions.

Value All Family Configurations

Be aware that children might be sensitive to topics that may seem uncomplicated to you. For example, reading *The Runaway Bunny* could be painful for a child who doesn't have a mother. Include all types of families in the stories you tell, the songs you sing, the images you display. Make sure children know that there is no "regular" family—families can be any group of people who love each other. The American Home Economics Association (1993) defines a family unit as two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time. The family is that climate that one comes home to, and it is this network of sharing and commitments that most accurately describes the family unit, regardless of blood, legal ties, adoption or marriage.

Be Sensitive

The messages children receive at home can conflict with the ones you send. Some families will be supportive of your work to create a bias-free program. Some may not. Make sure you understand clearly how these family members feel, so you will not ask their child to do anything that would cause problems at home.

Adapted from *Bias-Free Foundations: Early Childhood Guidebook for Educators*
(2005, 23–23).