

TIPS TO ENGAGE FAMILY MEMBERS FROM DIVERSE CULTURES IN THEIR CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

Linda Skogrand

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
Family and Human Development

May 2003

FL-2003-01

We know that there are many ways in which the increasing numbers of families from diverse cultures are different from each other and are different from the dominant culture in this country, and there are many ways in which they are the same. One of the ways families are the same, no matter what the cultural background, is that family members care about children and want to play a role in children's lives. Culturally, families may be very different in terms of which family members are included as major caregivers to children; who is viewed as the important teachers of the children; how they transmit cultural heritage; and how family events are celebrated. Learning about these differences can provide children with an understanding of the rich tapestry of life experiences. This knowledge will ultimately make children more culturally competent individuals. Inviting family members from diverse cultures to be partners with program staff to provide this knowledge is an excellent and enriching way to engage family members in their children's activities. These activities can include school activities, day care programming, youth programs such as 4-H, religious activities, and other community programming.

UNDERSTANDING THE FAMILIES OF CHILDREN IN THE PROGRAM

Engaging family members from diverse cultures in their children's activities will be more productive if we develop personal relationships with family members, learn about their cultures, and learn who participates in caring for children in their families.

Develop personal relationships with family members. The most significant issue to address with family members from diverse cultures is the development of a trusting relationship between family members and program staff. Often people from diverse cultural groups have not been welcomed and respectfully included in their children's activities. Many individuals need to get to know the people involved and develop a sense of trust before they feel comfortable participating in activities. Identify ways to get to know family members personally. Develop trust by making home visits, making telephone calls to the home, or personally talking to family members as they deliver and pick up their children.

Learn about the cultures of children in your program. As one learns about cultural practices, pay attention to such things as important family values, how decisions are made, and how members of the culture view children. Learning about a culture can happen in several ways.

Reading literature about a cultural group is one way to learn. This can be accomplished by visiting libraries or by using the Internet. Information is more likely to be authentic and based on cultural strengths if the information is written by someone from the culture. Attending cultural events such as Pow Wows, Cinco de Mayo, or Juneteenth are other means of learning. Pay attention to ethnic customs and heritage and how events are celebrated. Another way to learn about cultural practices is to visit markets or stores frequented by members of the culture about which you want to learn.

Learn who participates in caring for children in the cultures the children represent.

Understanding the concept of “family” in a culture is very important because, in some cultures, the role of caring for children is not only carried out by parents, but may be taken on by other family members who may or may not be biologically related to the children. For example, in many Native American tribes, children are cared for by several adults in addition to the biological parents. In Latino families, godparents and grandparents typically play a significant role in caring for children. One might begin to address the process of engaging family members by learning who participates in caring for the children. This knowledge may broaden the scope of who we want to engage.

INCLUSION OF CULTURE IN PROGRAMMING

It is essential that children’s activities reflect the cultures of the children enrolled. Not only is this an important aspect of positive cultural identity for the children, but it is an effective way to get family members involved in these activities. It sends a message that their culture is important. It also provides an opportunity for family members to participate in an activity where they are the experts. Pictures or art on the walls, serving ethnic foods, and providing activities that represent the cultures of the children in the program are all crucial for children to develop positive cultural identities. Such programming also provides opportunities for family members to become engaged in the activities. When there is a realization that family members from diverse cultures have valuable knowledge and expertise and can be a great asset to a program, family members will understand that they are valuable partners in providing programming. For these strategies to be effective, recognition and genuine respect for the cultural knowledge and skills these family members can bring to the program must be reflected by all staff and volunteers as they interact with families from diverse cultures.

Below are a few examples of ways family members from diverse cultures can contribute knowledge and skills in a way that is meaningful to both the family member and the program.

- Provide training to staff and volunteers about their culture.
- Provide suggestions about arts, crafts, books, newspapers and other artifacts that are culturally significant to be displayed or utilized in the learning environment.
- Provide suggestions for ethnic foods to be served or demonstrations on how to prepare the foods.
- Teach about and provide leadership in celebrating cultural holidays.
- Demonstrate crafts and describe their cultural and historical significance.
- Tell stories that have been handed down from generation to generation that are important to that family member’s cultural heritage.

The most successful way to engage family members is to contact them personally rather than sending out flyers or other printed materials.

As family members from diverse cultures realize their contribution to their children’s activities is appreciated and valued, they are likely to be willing to participate in other activities such as advisory committees, fund-raising, or program planning.

EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

Here is an example of how one day care center with an increasing enrollment of Latino children engaged Latino family members in making the day care center a culturally-rich learning environment.

Parents of Latino children were asked to provide a list of Spanish words used by children in their homes. Each week a new word was introduced for all the children to learn. Family members were also asked to provide recipes of some of their children's favorite Mexican foods and these foods were included in day care meals. A grandparent of one child was invited to participate in story time by telling some of the family stories that had been passed on from generation to generation. One parent who regularly picked up her child early in the day took time to introduce the children to piñatas and explained how they were used in family celebrations. Eventually, Latino family members participated in advisory committees and fund-raisers. Because the parents of the Latino children were typically employed during regular day care hours, other family members such as teens who got out of school earlier in the day, or extended family members would be invited to share information or knowledge.

REFERENCES

- McGoldrick, M. 1998. Introduction: Re-visioning family therapy through a cultural lens. In M. McGoldrick (Ed.), *Re-visioning family therapy: Race, culture, and gender in clinical practice*. New York: Guilford Press.
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2001. Societal support for learning. Retrieved January 17, 2003, from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2001/section6/indicator54.asp>
- Southwest Education Development Laboratory. 2000. *Family and community involvement: Reaching out to diverse populations*. Washington, D.C.: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

RESOURCES

- Child Trends, URL: <http://www.childtrends.org>
- Child Stats, URL: <http://childstats.gov/ac2000/toc.asp>
- Coleman, M., & Churchill, S. 1997. Challenges of family involvement. *Childhood Education*, 73, 144-148.
- Coleman, M., & Wallinga, C. 1999. Teacher training in family involvement: An interpersonal approach. *Childhood Education*, 76, 76-81.
- National Center for Cultural Competence, URL: <http://www.gucdc.georgetown.edu/nccc>
- Search Institute, URL: <http://www.search-institute.org/>

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University.