

THE Welcoming CLASSROOM

Building Strong Home-to-School
Connections for Early Learning



Johnna Darragh Ernst, PhD

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for Early Learning

JOHNNA DARRAGH ERNST, PHD



DEDICATION

To John, Alex, and Megan

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THE Building Strong Home-to-School Connections for Early Learning Welcoming CLASSROOM



Johnna Darragh Ernst, PhD



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Preface

My decision to write this book was inspired by personal and professional experiences. I have found that working with families can be both incredibly rewarding and challenging. On one hand, there is widespread recognition that family engagement is central to supporting children's success, and there is great reward in building thriving partnerships with families. On the other hand, challenges often arise regarding how to successfully engage families. These challenges can become particularly marked when practitioners and families have differing perspectives.

Successfully engaging families requires understanding what each of us brings to interactions with family members. Before we can form successful partnerships, we must fully understand the unique lens that we see the world through, including our own individual schemas, biases, and ways of interacting with those around us. This book includes a strong focus on understanding our unique social identities and the richness and complexities of diverse family identities. This understanding is essential to effective communication and collaboration. I examine fundamental communication and collaboration skills and discuss their meaning within the larger context of culturally competent communication. The goal of communication and collaboration is developing respectful, reciprocal, responsive relationships, programs, and environments.

Engaged families make an incredible difference in the lives of their children. Successfully engaging families requires adopting a strengths-based approach, in which professionals recognize family strengths, priorities, concerns, resources, and dreams and work collaboratively with families to support children's success.

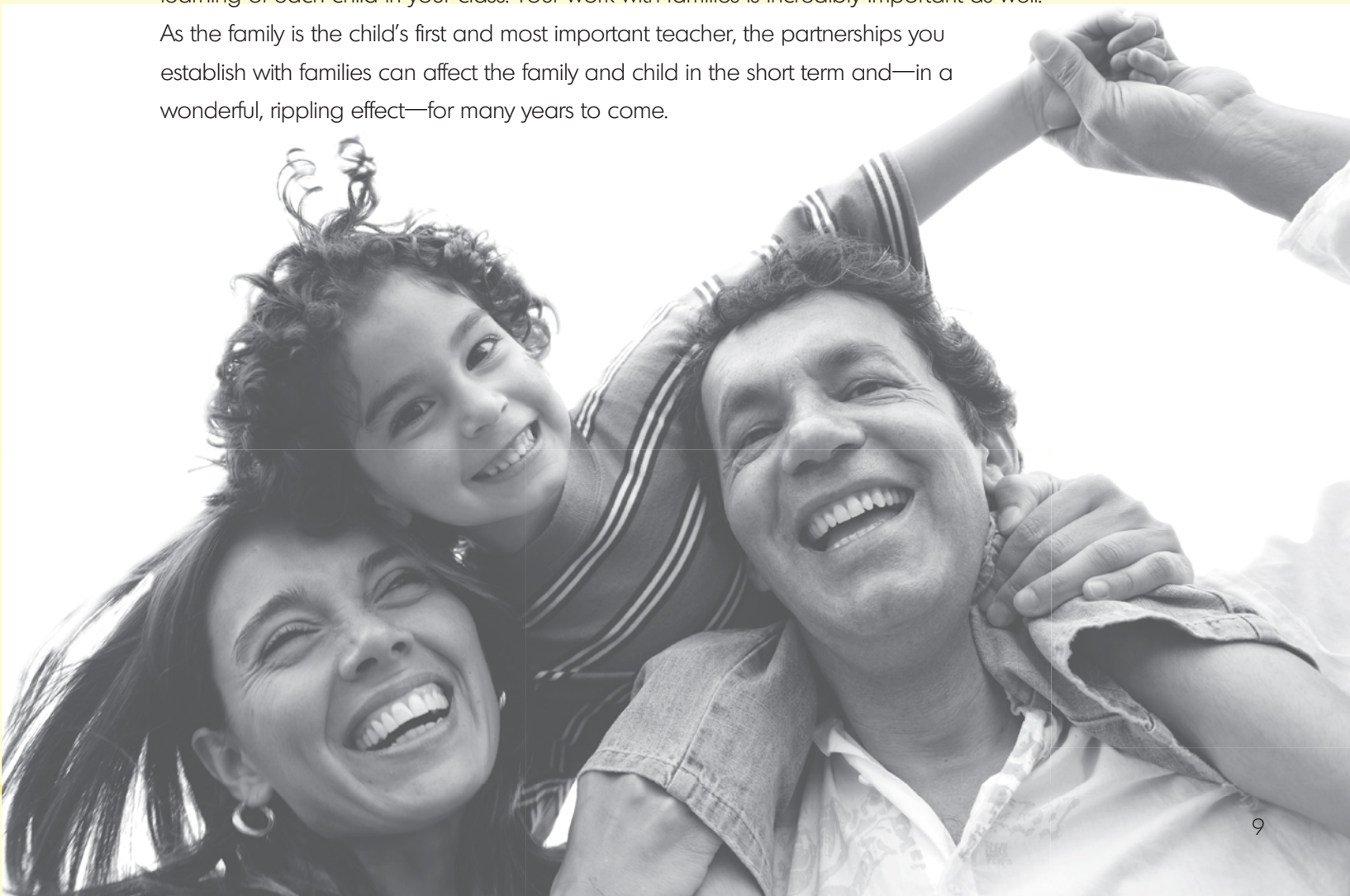
Your Role in Engaging Families



CHAPTER 1

Every day, you make an incredible difference in the lives of young children. Your daily, respectful, responsive interactions; intentional teaching strategies; and applications of developmentally appropriate practices assure that you support the development and learning of each child in your class. Your work with families is incredibly important as well.

As the family is the child's first and most important teacher, the partnerships you establish with families can affect the family and child in the short term and—in a wonderful, rippling effect—for many years to come.



You can make an important, lasting difference in the lives of young children by fully engaging families within the early childhood community. Engagement means that families can access all the early childhood community has to offer and can meaningfully participate in the classroom and program. Family engagement supports children's success based on a dynamic, interactive process that includes the following:

- ◆ a shared responsibility among families, communities, schools, and organizations where families are committed to a child's success;
- ◆ enduring, continuous commitment across the child's life in which the family's role changes as the child matures into young adulthood;
- ◆ reinforcement of learning across the multiple contexts in which children learn and develop (Weiss and Lopez, 2009).

Your ability to engage families begins with knowing yourself. Who are you as a communicator? What are your social identities and cultural framework? How do these factors interact with the social identities and cultural frameworks of families in your classroom and influence your ability to form effective partnerships with families? What strategies are most effective in engaging each family within your larger organization and classroom? Your knowledge and skills as a culturally competent communicator who works to develop respectful, reciprocal, responsive relationships and environments are essential in ensuring engagement.

Building Strong Foundations

Mutual respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness create the foundation for developing thriving relationships with families (Barerra, Corso, and Macpherson, 2003). Respect recognizes boundaries that define the individual's unique identities. When you respect someone, you are open to her individuality. Reciprocity requires that you provide families an equal voice. While expertise and experience may vary, when there is reciprocity everyone feels validated. Responsiveness allows for taking different directions based on the needs of the individual and the family—responsiveness honors and creates connection and synergy (Barerra, Corso, and Macpherson, 2003).

Building strong foundations that support family engagement requires knowledge and skills, including the following:

- ◆ communication and collaboration skills and knowledge of how to apply these,
- ◆ knowledge of your own social identities and cultural framework and how these influence communication and collaboration with others,
- ◆ culturally competent communication skills,
- ◆ knowledge of culturally and linguistically competent practices at the organizational level that support each family, and
- ◆ knowledge of culturally and linguistically competent practices at the classroom level that support each family.

Diversity is shaped by our unique social identities, including such factors as race, gender, age, varied abilities, language, ethnicity, social class, religiosity, the region of the country lived in, political affiliation, and sexuality, including sexual orientation. How we identify with these factors provides us with our cultural framework. The term *culture* is used in this book to refer to the diversity we experience across each of these factors. Successfully engaging each family requires attention to your own social identities and cultural framework, as well as how your identities and framework interact with the families you work with.

Adopting a Strengths-Based Approach

Family engagement supports positive child outcomes. We know, for example, that supporting family engagement improves school readiness, promotes student academic achievement, and increases graduation rates (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Students with engaged parents throughout early childhood and adolescence are more likely to graduate from high school (Englund, Englund, and Collins, 2008).

We also know that many families experience obstacles that might interfere with their full engagement. A disproportionate number of students who drop out of high school and college are from low-income backgrounds, of racial and ethnic minorities, or have disabilities (Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg, 2010). Many of these children and their families are products of a system in which differences are viewed as deficits or are labeled as gaps rather than as potential strengths. When applied to children, the deficit model can be far reaching. The deficit model highlights perceived deficits in children as opposed to

seeing each child's wonderful and complex strengths. A child who speaks Spanish and is developing her English skills is on her way to being bilingual; she is not simply deficient in her English proficiency. A child's outstanding math and literacy skills should not be overshadowed by a label that highlights her social challenges. Not only does the deficit model focus on innate challenges, but it also contributes to the overrepresentation of children who are culturally and linguistically diverse in special education (Kalyanpur and Harry, 2012).

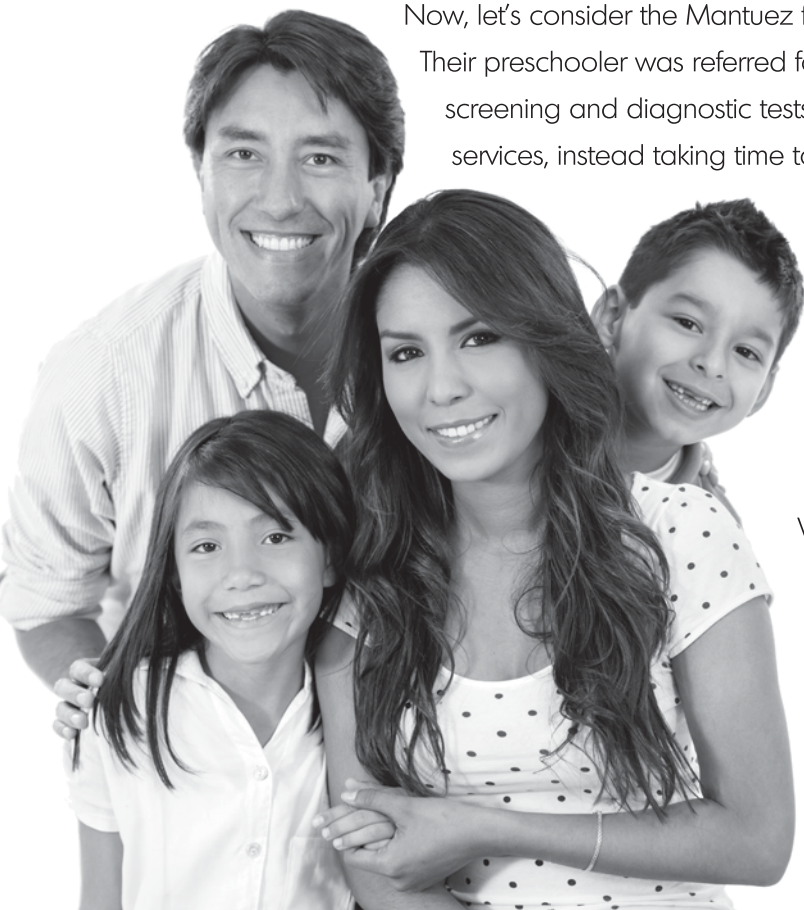
When applied to families, the deficit model can be far reaching as well. Consider the Runlez family. They work hard to put food on the table for their children, clothe them, and get them to school each day. In fact, each parent works two jobs because their jobs do not pay a living wage. They may be viewed as people with developing literacy skills who work low-income jobs, or they may be viewed through a lens that highlights their hard work, resilience, and commitment to supporting their children.

Now, let's consider the Mantuez family, who recently emigrated from Mexico.

Their preschooler was referred for early intervention services after a series of screening and diagnostic tests. The family has not immediately pursued these services, instead taking time to talk with friends and wait for an upcoming

appointment with their family doctor. They may be viewed as responsible people who desire to make a good decision for their child after gaining information from people they trust, or they may be viewed as people who are totally in denial about their child's needs.

Viewing families and children through a positive lens affects the way professionals interact with them. Successfully engaging families requires abandoning the deficit model and learning to adopt a strengths-based approach. The foundation of the strengths-based approach is respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness. This approach leaves no room for an attitude of blame when things go wrong



or a lens that highlights perceived shortcomings. This approach adopts a framework of shared responsibility. Families and professionals acknowledge and work within complementary roles to support children's success (Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg, 2010). A strengths-based approach views the individual in light of her capacities, talents, competencies, visions, values, and hopes, recognizing that these might be affected by present circumstances, oppression, and trauma (Nissen, 2001). For example, as opposed to looking at the Runlez family's low literacy and low income as risk factors potentially affecting their child's academic success, early childhood professionals can adopt an approach that focuses on the family's desire to support their children's education, their willingness to connect with local resources, and their capacity to apply these supports within their home environment. How people live their lives and the multiple contexts that influence their lives can be a source of support or stress. When adopting a strengths-based approach, the focus becomes maximizing resources to support each individual in her unique situation. The early childhood program, classroom, and professional can be important supports for families.

The strengths-based approach is based on key principles, adapted here to the field of early childhood education:

- ◆ Every individual, family, group, and community has unique strengths. The role of the professional is to focus on these strengths.
- ◆ The community and early childhood program is a rich source of resources.
- ◆ Supports are based on individual priorities.
- ◆ Collaboration is an essential component of maximizing family strengths.
- ◆ All people have the inherent capacity to learn, grow, and develop (Saint-Jacques, Turcotte, and Pouliot, 2009).

One of the most important aspects of the strengths-based approach is that it shifts away from an "at-risk" paradigm and moves to one where individuals can overcome challenges when provided with the right supports (Price-Robertson, 2010). The strengths-based approach represents an important shift from "What are families missing?" to "What do families need to develop and thrive?"

You have a critical role in providing supports. Your responsibility includes discovering each family's unique strengths, concerns, priorities, and resources. Once you have

Yesterday, Olga welcomed the Martinez family to her classroom. They recently emigrated from Mexico, are fluent in Spanish, and are developing their English skills. Already part of the classroom community is the Mailloux family, whose children spend the week at their mother's home and the weekend at their father's. The Cappos-Hall family lives with both parents, who work full time for the same company. The Wills family consists of two mothers, and the Lusk family is headed by a single-parent father. The Cazalet family has four children, two of whom are foster children, and one of whom is currently receiving speech and occupational therapy services in Olga's classroom. Just last week, Olga was able to connect the Gaff family with the resources they needed for housing assistance, as the father just lost his job. Olga has not yet met Martin's parents, because his grandmother picks him up every day. These are just a few of the twenty families she interacts with on a daily basis, and each one brings rich diversity to the classroom community and has unique engagement needs.

identified these, you can work closely with each family to develop engagement strategies that enhance their ability to support their child's learning, serve as a partner within the school environment, advocate for their child, and serve as decision makers and leaders. Your work with the family may last a limited period of time, but families who successfully develop these strategies will positively affect their child throughout her school career. Your efforts will ripple out to support the child and family well beyond the time you are directly interacting with them!

Understanding and Defining Families

Close your eyes and picture the typical family. Who is included? Perhaps it looks similar to the family you grew up within, or maybe the family you picture looks like the family of a child in your classroom. Families are incredibly diverse. When you consider the typical family, keep in mind the following thoughts from Laura Howe, shared in her book *The Future of the Family*:



The first thing to remember about the [typical] family is that it doesn't exist. Families exist. All kinds of families in all kinds of economic and marital situations, as all of us can see... The [typical] family? Just which [typical] family did you have in mind? Black or white, large or small, wealthy or poor, or somewhere in between? Did you mean a father-headed, mother-headed, or childless family? First or second time around? Happy or miserable? Your family or mine?

Statistically, like many other countries around the world, the United States is becoming an increasingly globalized nation. According to 2010 U.S. census data, almost half of recent births in the United States are to minorities, with 49.8 percent of infants being members of a race-ethnic minority. More than a quarter of these infants, specifically, are Hispanic, 13.6 percent are African American, and 4.2 percent are Asians (Frey, 2011). Nearly one in two of these children were reported to be of two or more races. Nationally, there is an increasing trend toward gains in a youthful minority population, coupled with a trend toward an aging of the white population.

Currently, the children of immigrants who are also U.S. citizens are the fastest growing component of the child population. These children account for one-fourth of the nation's 75 million children and are projected to make up more than one-third of 100 million U.S. children by 2050 (Tienda and Haskins, 2011). Due to the wave of immigration that has occurred since the 1960s, children have become the most racially and ethnically diverse age group in the United States.

Nearly 15 million children—representing 21 percent of all children in the United States—live in poverty. The current definition of poverty is based on a family income that is below the federal poverty level, defined as \$22,350 for a family of four (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2012). Covering basic expenses requires about twice that amount! If that standard is applied, 44 percent of our nation’s children live in low-income families. Poverty is identified as the greatest threat to children’s overall well-being, as it affects a child’s ability to learn and can contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems as well as poor health and mental health outcomes (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2012). There are a variety of different factors associated with children’s chances of experiencing poverty, including race/ethnicity, parent level of educational attainment, and employment.



ISSUES OF OPPORTUNITY: RACE AND ETHNICITY

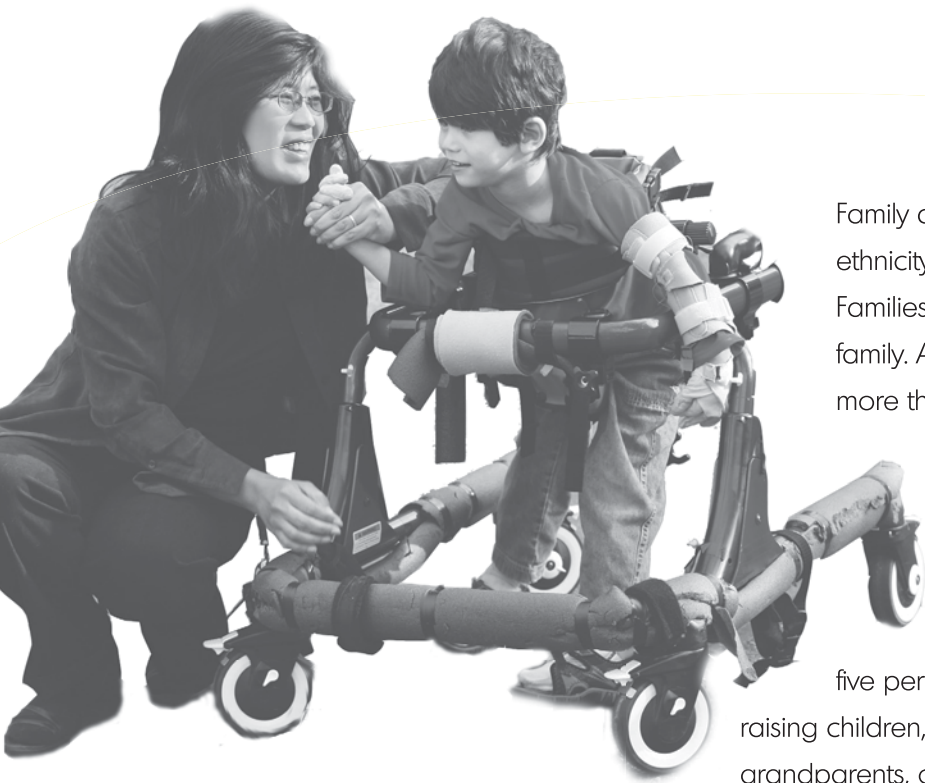
Hector and Anya are similar to many children entering kindergarten—they are eager to learn, have parents who want the best for their children, and are looking forward to all the school year has to offer. Both children, however, have experienced obstacles that have interfered with their school readiness: inadequate nutrition in their early years, a lack of access to health care, and poor quality child care. Although their parents are highly motivated to support their success, each child's parents work two jobs and return to homes in unsafe neighborhoods that are short on resources to support their children's development. Hector, Anya, and their families are not alone in experiencing these obstacles, and we know that these obstacles can have far-reaching effects on high-school completion rates, postsecondary education, earnings later in life, and the ability to build assets (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006). Hector and Anya need opportunity.

Barriers to opportunity include systemic inequities related to race and ethnicity. African American children score lower on measures of cognitive development when compared to white babies at the age of nine months (Child Trends, 2002). At twenty-four months, this trend has more than tripled, and by age four, the scores of African American children are significantly behind white children in proficiency in letter, number, and shape recognition (Flores, Tomany-Korman, and Olson, 2005).

Hispanic babies are not significantly behind white babies at nine months of age, but by twenty-four months, a gap does develop (Child Trends, 2002). Similar to African American children, there is a significant gap at four years of age. Both Hispanic and African American children arrive in kindergarten and first grade with lower levels of school readiness when compared to white children (Farkas, 2003). These pervasive gaps must be viewed within the context of similar gaps in income, wealth, safety, health, and justice-system involvement.

We know that many risks to development and school readiness are related to low socioeconomic status and that low socioeconomic status is highly connected to race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). Many people experience challenges in accessing resources due to language and cultural differences between the provider and the potential user (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). These challenges can be compounded for undocumented and non-English-speaking residents, who are often unaware of services within communities or unable to access these services. Institutionally, families and programs may have varying ideas about child-rearing practices and culturally based ideas about how to prepare a child for success in school. Programs may adopt an attitude of families and children needing to be ready for them, as opposed to adapting program practices to be ready for the diversity of families and children who will come through the doors. Creating opportunity starts with you.





Family diversity encompasses far more than race, ethnicity, or a family's socioeconomic status. Families can also vary by who is included in the family. According to the 2010 U.S. census data, more than half of America's children have spent some time being raised in a single parent family, with a slow and steady rise over the past decade of the number of fathers who are gaining custody of their children (currently four in one hundred). Twenty-five percent of all same-sex households are raising children, and children may be raised by grandparents, other family members, or in foster families.

Even when a child is being raised by her biological mother and father, another family member might have the primary decision-making responsibility for the child. To make assumptions about family form and the way the family functions is to potentially miss out on rich opportunities to engage families and form potential partnerships.

It is no surprise that early childhood classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Of children with disabilities, 50.9 percent are being served in some type of inclusive early childhood setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The enrollment of dual language learners has increased dramatically in early childhood programs nationwide; this trend is projected to continue (Office of Head Start, 2008). Close to half of the children in early childhood classrooms in the country are from racial or ethnic minorities (Cohn and Bahrapour, 2006). Currently, about 30 percent of children enrolled in Head Start programs are dual language learners, and 85 percent of these children speak Spanish as their primary language (Hernandez, Denton, and McCartney, 2007). These data point to the incredible need for early childhood teachers to be aware of the unique strengths, concerns, priorities, and resources of young children and families. Yet research indicates that most teachers do not receive adequate support to work with diverse populations during their preservice training programs (Winton and McCollum, 2008).

Early childhood professionals must understand who the families within their early childhood community are and must learn what each family needs to be successfully

engaged. Each family has a unique history and story, has their own way of acting upon and interacting with the world, and presents opportunities for you to develop mutually rewarding and beneficial connections. It is your responsibility to approach each family to learn who they are and what wonderful mix of strengths they bring to their child's world. From that foundation, you can learn about the family's concerns, priorities, and existing and needed resources, and—within a framework designed to support family engagement—foster a lasting and beneficial partnership.

Meaningfully Engaging Families

Engaging families requires supporting family access and meaningful participation and providing needed supports to both families and professionals. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children's 2009 joint position statement on early childhood inclusion spells out the factors central to creating high-quality, inclusive environments for young children. The defining features of inclusion also work well when applied to supporting engagement for families:

- ◆ All families need access to the early childhood community and the varied activities within it.
- ◆ Families need individualized supports and accommodations to support their meaningful participation.
- ◆ Families and teachers need supports in terms of infrastructure and professional development to ensure engagement strategies are developed and implemented.

The environment and the professionals within it need to fluidly respond to each family rather than forcing the family to fit the environment. Create a unique culture based on the children and families served. When you practice reciprocity, you are giving families a voice and input into policies and procedures. Reciprocity implies change and new directions based on shared synergy. While there are some factors in the environment, such as health and safety standards, that are not amenable to change, curriculum, the structure of the day, or communication can change in response to the needs of the classroom and center community. Creating opportunities for input demonstrates your openness and respect to the families within your environment.

Developing this unique culture requires reflection. Carefully consider the range of opportunities and experiences provided for children and families in your program and evaluate potential areas of growth. Table 1.1 offers some professional reflection questions pertaining to access, participation, and supports within early childhood programs and classrooms.



TABLE 1.1: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Family Engagement Variable	Family Engagement Factor Supported	Central Reflection Questions
Program values and validates family participation in decision making related to their child's education.	Access	Do families have meaningful decision-making opportunities that provide for and support their active participation in all aspects of their child's education?
There is a continuous exchange of knowledge and collaboration between families and the early childhood program.	Access	Does the program provide opportunities for families to share unique knowledge by participating meaningfully in volunteer and program events and activities? Do teachers seek information about children and families' lives and the communities they live within? Do they integrate this information into the curriculum and instructional practices in a meaningful way?
Consistent, two-way communication that is respectful of each family's linguistic preferences is facilitated.	Participation	Do both the program and the families initiate timely, continuous, linguistically respectful communication based on conversations about both the individual child and larger program?
The program and families emphasize creating and sustaining learning activities at home and in the community that extend the teachings of the program and enhance each child's development and learning.	Participation	Are there opportunities and supports for families to apply what is learned in school in the home and community environment?
Families value learning and support the program. The program and families collaborate in establishing goals for children both within the home and at school.	Supports	Are meaningful goals created for children that reflect family strengths, concerns, and priorities, as well as maximize their resources?
Program leadership and teachers work to create an ongoing and comprehensive system for promoting family engagement through dedication, training, and acquiring needed supports.	Supports	Does program staff have the needed supports to implement family engagement strategies in a comprehensive and systematic way?
(Adapted from Halgunseth et al., 2009.)		

As Table 1.1 implies, although there are defined family engagement factors, support for each family's access and participation is unique, as what each family brings to the early childhood community is unique. Each family will have unique strengths, priorities, concerns, and resources relative to enhancing the development of their child. Identify each family's strengths, priorities, concerns, and resources by asking questions such as the following:

- ◆ What are the interests, needs, and strengths that could link the child and family with a wider network of supports?
- ◆ What are the family's current strengths in managing their daily lives and meeting their child's needs? How can these strengths be expanded?
- ◆ What would the family like to do to support their child's development and learning?
- ◆ What is the family's approach to problem solving?
- ◆ What are the family's concerns, hopes, and plans?

(Adapted from Turnbull and Summers, 1987.)

A family strength might be their investment and participation in your preschool program—they bring their child to school regularly and always want to know how their child is doing. You, in turn, support the family's full participation through soliciting their input into curriculum decision making. Because of this reciprocity and your respectful communication, you learn that they want to support their child's developing reading skills. The family is concerned, however, about their ability to accomplish this goal due to their own developing literacy skills. You respond by providing books for the family in both English and their home language, and you coordinate your efforts with the English-as-a-second-language program the family is participating in. You also respond by connecting the family with additional resources in the community, including the local library. Your program director makes sure that you and your coteacher are able to attend professional development workshops on supporting a child and family in developing their English skills while preserving their home language.

Successful collaboration with this family is based on the foundation that you built from respectful, reciprocal, responsive communication and collaboration. We will explore communication and collaboration strategies designed to engage families in a comprehensive, systematic way.

Shaping Family Engagement

Each family who comes to your early childhood community presents a natural opportunity for connection and relationship around a shared interest—their child. To truly respond to families, our understanding of the families and responsiveness to them must be genuine and deep.

Understanding families happens on three different levels, what Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) describe as overt, covert, and subtle levels of cultural awareness. On the overt level, a teacher might recognize a family's concern over a lack of transportation, and she might respond by planning a family event that includes transportation to and from the event. Another teacher might know that a child speaks French at home, and so he might learn a few words of the language and arrange to have a translator for the family during conferences.



We are less likely to be aware of cultural factors at the covert level, as these factors go a bit deeper and are generally not recognized by outward signs. Factors at the covert level of cultural awareness include status (how the role of the teacher is viewed, for example, or how the family members view their role as parent within the early childhood community) or communication styles (such as preferences for greetings, eye contact, or body posture). A family might, for example, not participate in classroom activities and events because they see education as entirely the role of the teacher. Another family might not participate because they feel they have nothing to contribute. One family might view a handshake as disrespectful, and another might feel looking the teacher directly in the eye is disrespectful.

Even less likely to receive our attention are subtle levels of cultural recognition, including recognizing the embedded values and beliefs that underlie people's actions (such as parenting values and how these shape goals for children's behavior). These embedded values and beliefs are often taken for granted and assumed to be universal but are specific to the individual's own culture. A family might value their child's quiet, reserved behavior, for example, and might not respond to or understand your concerns about what you see as the child's lack of interaction with other children. Early childhood professionals must respond at overt, covert, and subtle levels to support connection and engagement with families.

Family engagement strategies need to be comprehensive and systematic. Efforts to engage families are often piecemeal and an add-on to the daily operations of programs and schools rather than integral aspects interwoven into program operations. A classroom might have certain opportunities for communication and collaboration in place—daily conversations and notes home, a family night, opportunities to observe—but the program lacks systemic, integrated, and sustained efforts that are meaningful at all levels of program operations. When efforts are systematic, integrated, and sustained, families not only know what is happening in the classroom but also have input. Families not only know of program events, but also they have helped plan and evaluate them. Families not only benefit from program policies, but also they have helped shape them. Family engagement strategies must be an important part of program structures and processes and must reflect and support family and child goals (Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg, 2010).

Understanding the Effects of Family Engagement

Engaging families might sound like a good thing to do—it makes sense that you would want to involve families with each aspect of your early childhood education program. However, research has shown that engaging families has far greater implications than a good feeling that comes from families participating in your program. Engaged families make a difference in the lives of their children! Supporting family engagement improves school readiness, promotes student academic achievement, and increases graduation rates (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). We know that engaged families have children who perform well in school (Izzo et al., 1999) and are more likely to be promoted to the next grade (Mantizicopoulos, 2003). We know that children with engaged families have more positive engagement with peers and other adults and tend to have more positive attitudes overall toward their learning (McWayne et al., 2004). Family engagement also serves as an important buffer, reducing the negative impact of poverty on children’s academic and behavioral outcomes. Further, we know that the benefits of family engagement persist over time (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006). The knowledge, skills, and energy you put forth to engage a family now can be a benefit that supports families for many years in the future.



Each family you work with shapes how program outcomes are implemented. The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework offers seven outcomes to family engagement that programs should strive for:

- ◆ supporting family well-being through support for family safety, health, and financial security;
- ◆ supporting positive parent-child relationships through building warm relationships that nurture children's learning and development;
- ◆ supporting families as lifelong educators by supporting families in enhancing their child's everyday development and learning at home, in school, and in their communities;
- ◆ supporting families as learners by supporting families in advancing their own learning interests through education and training that holistically addresses their learning goals, including parenting, careers, and life goals;
- ◆ supporting family engagement in transitions by supporting families in advocating for their child as they transition to new learning environments throughout the child's educational career;
- ◆ supporting families' connections to peers and the community through supporting connections to peers and mentors in formal and informal social networks serving to enhance the families' social well-being and community life;
- ◆ supporting families as advocates and leaders through supporting family participation in leading, decision-making activities, policy development, and other state and local organizing activities to improve their child's learning and development.

These outcomes speak to supporting the family in the present and in the long term, reflecting the idea that the effect you have on a family now can ripple out and affect them for many years to come.

Chapter Reflection Questions

- ◆ What are your current goals for engaging families within your classroom and program?
- ◆ What do you see as the greatest benefits to family engagement?
- ◆ What are some of the strengths of the families you work with on a daily basis?
- ◆ What do you see as a benefit of viewing families through a lens that focuses on their strengths?
- ◆ What is your definition of meaningful family engagement?

Questions to Explore with Families

- ◆ What are your goals for becoming involved in the classroom and program?
- ◆ What do you see as benefits to becoming involved in your child's education?
- ◆ What do you feel are some of your family's strengths?
- ◆ What would a program and classroom that places a priority on engaging families look like?



**Engaged
families
make a
difference
in the lives
of their
children!**

The children in today's early childhood classroom are more culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse than ever. As a teacher, your challenge is to partner with each family through recognizing their individual strengths, concerns, priorities, and resources.

In **The Welcoming Classroom: Building Strong Home-to-School Connections for Early Learning**, Dr. Johnna Darragh Ernst offers practical ideas for creating a welcoming atmosphere for families that will encourage them to participate in their children's learning community.

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- Gain new strategies for creating a home-school link to support learning.
- Create a richer learning environment by integrating unique family cultural perspectives.
- Learn ways to encourage family participation in decision making.
- Learn strategies to develop families as resources.
- Communicate the message that all families are valued members of the learning community.

From improving children's school readiness to encouraging positive engagement with peers, promoting student academic achievement, increasing graduation rates, and helping reduce the negative impact of poverty, the benefits of engaging families early will impact the young children in your care long after they leave your classroom!



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