



Tips to Support Relationships with Diverse Families

As professionals, special educators have an underlying goal to establish good relationships with the families they serve. While trust and collaboration are always important in these relationships, there is another level of expectation added when the meetings and services provided through an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) occur in the family home. When working with families from diverse communities, the typical challenges are often compounded by differences in language, culture, and tradition. The initial contacts provide the opportunity for the family to view the school experience as positive and responsive. Opening your home to someone is an act that implies a sense of trust.

Differences between cultures can be subtle and unexpected. Even though a family from Mexico City and another from a small town in the Mexican state of Morelos share the same language and country of origin, their experiences, traditions, and cultural norms may be very different. The same may be true of people from the same country but different ethnic groups.

While early childhood care providers may have goals around the family being involved in their child's education and development, some cultures have differing views about teachers as authorities. Some families may struggle to build trust with someone outside their community, while others may hold teachers in high regard and feel questioning a person in that role as disrespectful. Seemingly small cultural norms such as not wearing shoes in the home or greeting with a handshake can be of great importance and affect the relationship going forward.

How do you start off on the right foot on your first visit with a family? The following tips are designed to help you create and maintain effective partnerships with families, leading to increased parent involvement and ultimately better outcomes for children.

Setting the stage for positive and productive family interactions

Make it your school district's goal to have interpreters available and involved in the earliest point of contact with families. Anticipate needs and proactively arrange for interpreters to be available based on a current demographic study of the families in your community. A trained interpreter can make sure that the information a family is hearing is relayed to them accurately. The family's comprehension of the information shared should be the most important objective when interacting with a family.

- **Call the parents before any type of meeting, with an interpreter if needed.** Clearly explain the purpose of the meeting and the desired outcome, and answer questions they may have. Explain who will participate and what each will specifically do during the meeting. Discuss the role of the family and how they will be asked to participate.
- **Ask about the need for an interpreter and translated materials.** Some families may not be familiar with a written language or may speak a language that does not have a written version. This information should be relayed to the rest of the team working with the family.
- **Try to learn as much as you can about the family's culture.** To prepare for the initial home visit, reach out to a community or cultural center to acquaint yourself with basic cultural beliefs and traditions. Cultural liaisons and interpreters can be vital in helping you acclimate. Be sure to plan your visit around family's cultural and religious observations and holidays.

Conducting an effective family meeting

- **It is essential to devote some time to conversation and activities to help build trust.** Begin by sharing a little personal background information. Being open can help a family see you as approachable and may make it easier to feel more open themselves. Share why you went into your profession and what you enjoy about your work. Expect that it will take time to establish trust.
- **Take a strength-based approach.** Things you may see or experience as you enter a family home may influence your thoughts and affect your actions. Try to focus on the strengths of a family, like a caring multigenerational household or the value in a culture that encourages storytelling.
- **Let the family inform you if there is any preference in who receives information and makes decisions.** Respect the family structure and value system. It is not unusual for extended family members to be present and to have a role in raising the child. Recognize the importance in many cultures of designated community elders, spiritual leaders, and spiritual helpers who families turn to for advice and approval. Their perspective may be different than yours. Acknowledge this and be willing to listen and learn.
- **Acknowledge misunderstandings to the family.** We all know the feeling of being in a new situation and recognizing that something you have said has had a different interpretation than what was intended. Be willing to address misunderstandings as needed.
- **End the meeting on a positive note by praising the child and family.** Be clear about who they should contact if they have more questions after the meeting. Thank them for their valuable input and participation.

Understanding differences in culture

- **Be aware that physical and other contact may differ between cultures.** In some cultures physical contact is not a norm, and in some it is not allowed between different genders. Be aware, and do not initiate a handshake unless an individual extends their hand first. Do not interpret a lack of eye contact as a sign of disinterest or disrespect.
- **Be open to families who use a combination of different philosophies and approaches.** These may include herbal remedies, massage, and other healing practices. If possible, include these in the child's plan if appropriate. For example, if the family is already using a specific massage practice, see if that activity can be incorporated into an occupational therapy plan.
- **Be sensitive as families may have a different perception of their child's disability.** This can affect their working relationship with professionals. Listen and try to understand the family's perspective and respect their beliefs. This can be especially true if you are sharing the results of an evaluation and the idea that their child has a disability and qualifies for special education is new to them. Be willing to allow them time to digest the new information, and be willing to allow for questions. It might be necessary to set another meeting to discuss plans moving forward.
- **Hospitality is highly valued in many cultures.** Even a polite refusal to an offering of food or drink may be perceived as a rejection. If the offering is something you do not care for, asking for a glass of water instead can help the situation remain positive.
- **Even if a family speaks English, do not assume they understand what is written.** Often, the vocabulary and reading level contained in public agency documents can be a barrier. In an indirect and sensitive way, check frequently for understanding. Offer to provide the information in a different format if reading English is not a skill of the family.

Be aware that these tips are not all encompassing. Cultural differences can be difficult to navigate, and the personal perspectives of those involved will always be the predominant factor in any human relationship. Every family is unique. Do not make assumptions and seek to understand as opposed to passing judgment. The time you put in to creating relationships based on mutual respect with a family will be more satisfying for the family, for you, and ultimately for the child.