

Engaging Diverse Families in Your Early Childhood Program

By Wendy Guerrero-Rivera

Parent involvement is of absolute importance in early childhood education. For many parents, this step signifies the introduction to the education system at large. Many creative opportunities exist for parent involvement in early childhood programs and most parents participate in at least one way. However, there is often a lower percentage of parent participation from parents in the diverse community.

In my past experience as a Parent Involvement Coordinator I learned that it is not because these families don't care or don't want to participate. Culturally diverse families may have many differences from mainstream families; but they also have many similarities. Wanting the best education for their children and doing whatever they can to support them is one of these great similarities.

So how can we ensure all parents become more involved in their children's early care and education experiences?

Creating a welcoming environment is key!

First, it is important to note that for some parents stepping into your program is the first time they will step into a school in this country. Some families who have just arrived to this country do not speak English, do not know the system, and feel extremely intimidated. The first and best way to get them involved is to make them feel welcomed. Early childhood programs can make these families feel welcomed by developing relationships with them. Directors, teachers, and other early childhood staff—such as receptionists, cooks, and van/bus drivers—can attempt to get to know these families better by trying to understand their culture and their traditions.

Developing a relationship of mutual trust and respect by the director and staff is critical. Relationship building should be ongoing and have a connection to the family's home. Once this partnership is established, families will feel more comfortable becoming engaged in their child's early childhood program.

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Where can you go to get started in learning how to better engage diverse families in your program?

I encourage you to revisit the McCormick Center's blog post, "The Value of Culture in Your Family Partnerships," for some ideas to help engage diverse families in your program. I also invite you to join us for sessions surrounding this topic at Leadership Connections™ National Conference. Or, consider exploring the Aim4Excellence Module 8: Building Partnerships with Families online module to help you implement new strategies in your program. Below are resources that can provide additional insight into this topic:

- Preparing Young Latino Students for Success: Best Family Engagement Practices (National Council of La Raza)
- Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature (National Association for the Education of Young Children)
- Why Address Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Preservice and Inservice Preparation? (Zero to Three)

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