

Introduction

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This practical book provides strategies on honoring diversity and partnering with families to support, enhance, and maximize the quality of care and education of young children. Many of the strategies in this book address ideas about how early childhood professionals can create a climate of trust by communicating with family members in a collaborative way. The goal is to create useful, inclusive programs that respect and honor differences in families and individuals. These easy-to-use strategies provide a strong basis for working and communicating productively with families of all types and from varied backgrounds.

NEW IN THIS EDITION

- The third edition of this book addresses diversity up front in the first section, where chapter titles show a number of different types of families with whom readers will likely work. Though not all the chapter titles throughout the book necessarily reflect diversity, there is something about diversity in each one. The book has always been about diversity, but that fact was not always pointed out in each chapter of the first two editions. Now it is, with new sections added relating the subject matter of the chapter directly to diversity.
- An emphasis on antibias environments throughout helps the reader keep in mind that particular way of honoring differences.
- In keeping up with the times, this new edition is expanded to include military families and grandparents raising their grandchildren.
- With electronic media expanding every day, this edition helps the reader to reflect on the growing influence all types of media have on young children—even infants and toddlers.
- The book still addresses all levels of early education, from birth to eight years old, but in this new edition there is more focus on the reader who is concerned with the primary grades than in previous editions.
- The reader will find more about the influence of economic hardship on children and families, as more and more families now live in poverty.
- Changes in the sections called *What Teachers Can Do* include turning negatives into positives when strategies had previously included words like “don’t.” Also in those sections, additional strategies were added to almost every chapter.
- Stories, examples, and vignettes help readers to apply the information to real life, so those have been increased in this edition.
- This book has always asked the reader to use self-reflection as an important tool to understanding and working with families. This edition has increased that emphasis.

- At the request of reviewers, more on home visits was added, so even those readers who are or will end up in situations where they can't make home visits, will come to appreciate them.
- Some chapters, such as Chapter 40 on Transitions, have added material. That subject has been greatly expanded to give information and strategies related to more kinds of transitions so readers can move beyond ideas only about developmental transitions or changing classrooms or programs.

FAMILY-CENTERED CARE AND EDUCATION

This book is based on the concept called *family-centered care and education*. The tendency in the early care and education field in the past has been to focus on the child, and indeed, some programs actually used to use the words “child-centered programs” in their philosophy statements. This book is based on the idea that you can't separate the child from the context of the family. *The child* is a term that has no real meaning, because no child stands alone; the influences of the family are always present. When readers understand programs that regard those influences as a good thing, they are on their way to becoming family-centered. When a program becomes family-centered, diversity is a part of the package. Students of Early Childhood theories and practices will see that respecting diversity is addressed in two major sections and is an underpinning of all of the strategies. Where respecting diversity isn't boldly highlighted, it is still mentioned. With diversity comes the idea of equity as well as inclusion, meaning that early childhood educators have to be fair and include everybody. Educators can't celebrate diversity and then exclude some families from the program because they or their children are too *different*. This book is about including *all* families and their children. It's about honoring diversity, even when it is hard to do so.

WHAT DOES “PARTNERSHIP” REALLY MEAN?

Partnership is another theme in this book. In building partnerships, readers are shown that establishing trust is key because you can't have a partnership without it. A partnership is different from merely trying to get families to cooperate with the program and carry out its goals. Involving parents is an approach often taken with that idea in mind. Policymakers learn about how school readiness and academic achievement are strengthened when parents are involved in their children's education. They jump on the bandwagon to teach parents how to help their children carry out the program goals. The parents then learn how to help their children according to the school's way of doing things.

A partnership is different from that kind of parental involvement, because it implies equity and shared power rather than one side dominating the other. In a partnership, roles and responsibilities may differ, but both sides have rights. At the heart of the partnership lies the welfare of the child. Each partner—family member and teacher—brings different strengths and skills to the union. Partners collaborate rather than issue orders. In a partnership, communication is two-way rather than hierarchical. It takes communication skills for two parties to work in partnership. Accordingly, many of the strategies in this book relate to communication. Communication may be very different if the focus of the school is merely about getting parents on board so that they can help their children by doing at home what the school system and educators see as beneficial to readiness or academic achievement.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION IS THE MODEL

An approach to involving parents is often linked with parent education programs. The partnership approach is not the same, even though both involvement and education may well be part of it. Certainly, families who are involved in a program are more likely to take their partnership role seriously. Also, early childhood education professionals have knowledge, experience, and expertise that parents can benefit from; at the same time, parents know their own children, goals, beliefs, values, family traditions, and culture better than anyone else. So the educational model here is *transformative education* rather than the traditional teacher–student, one-way educational approach.

Transformative education is defined as two people or groups coming together and interacting in such a way that both parties learn something and are changed for the better by the interaction.

SOLVING THE NAME DILEMMA

In writing this book, I was faced with the problem of what to call the adults who work in early childhood programs. This book takes in a wide sweep of early childhood and includes children from birth to age eight. Although all adults in these programs could be called *teachers*, some who work with the youngest children resist that term because they don't *teach*; they *care for*. Others who resist the term *teacher* think of themselves as facilitators of learning and prefer to call themselves *educators*. Still other adults who work with children in that age range work out of their homes, not in schools or centers, and call themselves *family child care providers*. Early childhood education is a complex field, and no one name works for everybody in it.

I also had to figure out a name for the early childhood programs themselves, which included all the different forms. A third-grade classroom with a teacher is different from an infant–toddler center with caregivers, yet both fit under the label *early childhood education*. A half-day preschool is different from a kindergarten and also from a full-day child care program, which is different from a hospital child care center that is open 24 hours a day to serve staff on all shifts.

CARE AND EDUCATION CAN NEVER BE SEPARATED

So what names did I use? I addressed the dilemma by changing *early childhood education* to *early care and education* and calling the adults who work in the field *teachers* at some times and *early care and education professionals* or *early childhood professionals* at other times. Adding the word *care* highlights the idea that care and education can never be separated in the early years. The letters ECE, which are commonly used to define the programs for children ages birth to age eight, are used by some to mean *Early Childhood Education*. I use those letters to mean *Early Care and Education* to broaden the scope. To me it is very important to link education with care, and not use the term education alone, even when the example is in a primary classroom in a public school.

For young children, care is always a part of the educational process. Nell Noddings writes about this subject in many books, and she takes in the whole realm of education when she says care must always be part of it—even through higher education. The point is that though you may separate programs by the age of the children they serve, and give them different labels, all should include both education and care.

Other terms also varied by the focus of the strategy, so sometimes I used *school* and *classroom*, and other times I used *program* and *center*. Sometimes I was aiming more at teachers in schools, and other times more at staff in programs such as prekindergarten or preschool, infant–toddler programs, early intervention programs, child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, and school-age child care. It’s complex, because these programs take place in a variety of environments, including centers, schools, and homes, and some strategies pertain more to one setting than to the others.

In summary, this book is a targeted text that offers practical strategies for partnering with families, creating the trust necessary for true collaboration, and developing programs that include all families and individuals. Of course, at the heart of all these useful strategies lies the welfare of the child.

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1

Appreciating All Kinds of Families

WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

Families vary in income levels. They also come in many sizes, shapes, structures, and configurations. For example, there are two-parent families, single-parent families, and extended families with several generations in one household. There are stepfamilies and blended families, biracial families, gay families, and straight families. Grandparents may be raising their grandchildren, or older siblings raising younger ones. Transnational families may live in two countries. Migrant families may move where the work is. Military families may move a lot and/or experience periods of separation. Children may have been born into the family or come by other means, such as foster care, adoptions, or kinship networks. Some children live in more than one home and are members of more than one family.

There are many definitions of *family*. Those definitions may focus on genetics, residence, emotional ties, rules, or legal status. The American Academy of Family Physicians (2003) defines family as “a group of individuals with a continuing legal, genetic, and/or emotional relationship.” One teacher defines family as “the people living in the children’s homes who love and care for them,” and this same teacher also makes sure that all families are welcomed and respected (Rieger, 2008). She lets children and their families know that if they care to, they can talk about family members who may not be with them, recognizing that military duty, divorce, incarceration, and death can separate family members from the child.

Not all families have homes. The general view of the homeless population may be of city-dwelling, single adult men with mental illness or alcohol or drug additions, but the truth is that homeless families are everywhere and many of them have children. This group needs the same respect and consideration as any other group of families and often needs more support and services than most families in the school or other early childhood setting. Homelessness disrupts every aspect of family life, including the health and well-being of the members and the education of their children (Thoennes, 2008).

In a workshop, Linda Brault (2007) asked participants to categorize their families in terms of size by raising their hands when she asked, “How many grew up in a large family? A small family? A medium-sized family?” There was wide disparity in their concept of large, small, and medium-sized families. Some counted only their parents and siblings. Others counted extended family members. When the presenter questioned individuals further, it became clear they had very different definitions of families and membership in them. For example, some counted dead people as family members and deemed them as important as live family members. For other participants, nonrelatives had the same status as blood relatives. This was a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse group, which showed the many different concepts about who makes up a *family*.

One of the problems in working with diverse families arises when the teacher’s notion of family gets in the way of understanding and respecting all kinds of families. The problem is magnified when a family who doesn’t live up to the teacher’s picture of an ideal family is suspected of child abuse, while the same teacher overlooks signs of abuse in an “ideal” family. Since teachers and other early childhood professionals are mandated reporters, the repercussions could be serious, not only for the children and the families but also for the teacher.

While looking at all the different kinds of families that teachers and other early educators can work with, recent immigrants are in a special category. Immigrant status may have a huge influence on how the family operates. It's important to recognize that all Americans, except for Native Americans, were once immigrants. It's also important to realize that at one time or another most immigrant groups have been blamed for the woes of the nation. Some immigrant families face a good deal of prejudice in addition to the other challenges facing them as they settle in a country that is different from the one in which they were born. Early care and education programs should support these families and do what they can to help them deal with their many challenges.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

- Start by putting aside the idea of a “normal” or “ideal” family. Broaden your definition of family. When you approach a family who doesn't fit your ideal, you see them as “other,” and “othering” people gets in the way of getting to know them and building a relationship. For many, the ideal family consists of a mother, father, two children, and maybe a dog, who all live together enjoying a middle-class lifestyle. That's one kind of family—there are many others!
- Realize that families who don't fit common notions of normal or ideal have to deal with being stereotyped, discriminated against, or ignored. Even though research on stereotypes is increasing, much of it focuses on race, gender, income level, and religion more than on changing the stigmas attached to families who vary from what is considered “the norm.”
- Recognize that teachers must value all families and move away from stereotypes and preconceived ideas about different kinds of families.
- Examine your program and institution to shed light on how the curriculum, materials, administrative hiring practices, and policies teach children and parents lessons about values related to families. The goal should be for all families to receive the same respect.



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- If you have family figures for a dollhouse or block area, put them all in one container, and let children decide for themselves how they want to configure a family. Don't set them up the way they came, with matching mother, father, and children.
- Learn to communicate and build relationships with people who are different from yourself, and become aware of the pitfalls of miscommunication.
- Be aware of the kinds of activities and assignments that relate to the child's family or the family's history, which may be painful, unavailable, or unknown. Asking about the origin of a child's name or for baby pictures can be a problem for children who were adopted past infancy. Asking a family to share artifacts can be painful if they fled from their homeland with only the clothes on their backs.
- Instead of celebrating Mother's Day or Father's Day as such, create a celebration day for children to show their gratitude for the person or persons who care for them. Let the child choose the person or persons to honor. Mother's Day or Father's Day can be painful for some single-parent or gay and lesbian families.
- Use a variety of means for contacting, working with, and involving family members in their children's out-of-home education and care.
- Get families involved with each other, and create a community.
- Recognize that the teacher has a good deal to learn from families—teaching should be regarded as a two-way process, which can be called a teaching–learning process, where the teacher and the learner often trade places.

2

Working with Immigrant Families

WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

Newly arrived immigrant families have a good many challenges. If they arrive undocumented (without papers) they may have fears that documented immigrants don't have. Will a family member be "picked up" and incarcerated? Will children be left behind when family members are deported? Will young family members who have no memories of the old country end up back there alone, without the language or skills to get along? The newspapers tell heart-rending immigrant stories. Although any immigrant may face bias and discrimination, some face much more than others.

Language can be a huge challenge for immigrants. At a time when new arrivals have so many new things to learn, their communication system may be compromised. All the change of leaving the old behind and starting new in a strange culture brings stress. Language difficulties greatly add to the stress. Nothing is easy, and immigrants meet up with intolerant people while they are getting settled—finding a place to live, signing up for utilities, understanding the transportation system, and getting a new job. When people can't understand immigrants, they sometimes get impatient with them. In a new language and culture, immigrants are slower than in their old country. They make many mistakes and sometimes are regarded as ignorant; however, if you could see them operate in their own language and familiar surroundings, they aren't the same people!

At a time when they need support, many immigrants are on their own. They have had to leave their support networks, including the extended family, behind. They may be alone in the world for the first time in their lives.

After immigrants have been here a while, the children in the family often get ahead of the adults in learning the language and figuring out the new ways of the society they live in. That situation puts parents at a huge disadvantage because traditional roles are reversed. Now the children are the ones who know best. They may even be embarrassed by their parents' awkward ways, difficulties in communication, and their accents. Where respect for the authority of elders was once the rule, now the children are the authorities. What worries for a family! Discipline may no longer work, and the children may be largely on their own.

Even though families may be uncomfortable about what is happening to their children, they have to send them to school, which may be quite different from schools in their own country. Sometimes they are forced to put their children in out-of-home care. Grandma is no longer there to stay with them, and immigrants may be unhappy about turning their children over to nonfamily members in child care programs. They may worry about identity issues and that their children may become assimilated and lose their cultural ties.

Although sometimes immigrant families disagree with what they see in the school or other early care and education program, they may feel as if they are putting their children into the hands of those they consider to be the authority, especially if such a person is called *teacher* or *director*. "The professional knows best" is their attitude. These families may have great respect for authority.

Some families still see themselves as the authority at home; in their minds, they create a huge separation between what they do at home and what happens in the early childhood

This sign was on the wall of a kindergarten classroom to make families feel welcome by finding their own language displayed.



program. Other families grant the teacher or other early childhood education professional supreme authority over all things to do with children, both in the program and at home. They see their job as learning about it so that they can do the same at home. When one teacher told a family who recently immigrated from another country that they should speak English to their children at home, they followed her advice even though their ability to speak English was limited. The result was that parent-child communication was greatly limited, and everyone was frustrated for a long time. The parents' English improved, but they always had a heavy accent and never became truly articulate in that language as compared to their own. The children learned English from school and from their peers but, to their parents' great sorrow, lost their home language.

Alicia Lieberman, a mental health specialist, offers strategies for working with immigrant families in her classic article "Concerns of Immigrant Families" (1995). The strategies she suggests are included in those listed below.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

- Appreciate the family's culture. Remember that difference doesn't mean deficit. Learn about the differences—is this a family where respect for elders means looking downward rather than looking them in the eye? You don't have to be an anthropologist to learn from families. Observation is one way; asking questions is another. Establish a relationship with each family so that asking questions doesn't put them on the defensive.
- If there is a language difference, remember to work with it. Talk as clearly as you can, using short sentences and plain words. Avoid jargon. Learn some words in the family's language and use them regularly.

- Make the classroom reflect the languages and cultures of the people in it, including the families and staff members. Appreciate and promote the home language of each family.
- Explain the routine of the program or classroom. Families may come from countries where the customs are very different.
- Acknowledge tension, and think about the reasons for it. Chances are that any tension between you and the parent is due to cultural differences.
- Ask parents about their child-rearing practices. When you don't understand a particular behavior or practice find out how things are done in their country. Try to communicate about your difference so that it's seen by the family as just that—a difference—and not as a deficiency on their part.
- Be aware of differing attitudes, practices, and perceptions of children and adults with disabilities.
- Serve as a cultural bridge between the parents' culture and the culture of the classroom or child care program. Help the parents understand the way things are done in the classroom or center.
- Remember that you are an authority figure and that most families want your approval.
- Establish a trusting atmosphere that encourages dialogue. Build trust before you try discussing problems, and when you do discuss problems, try to do so in ways that avoid a critical tone. Instead, express care and concern.
- Remember that immigration causes great stress for the whole family. People who felt self-confident and competent in their home country are now trying to learn some basic skills. They may be suffering from depression. But many immigrants with children in early care and education programs are full of hope for the future. You are part of that hope.
- Appreciate their culture, support them, and help them adjust to life in a new country.

Notice what is on the bulletin board under Broadway Children's School. How do you think immigrants feel when they find their own language in evidence around the classroom? That's one way of saying, "You are welcome here."

