

## Diversity: Growing in our practice

Diversity is woven into all aspects of the early learning education landscape. This is evident when looking at the diverse learning and developmental needs of children, or when looking at classroom populations that are increasing in diverse cultures and in diverse languages. Diversity is also apparent when families begin to reveal their personal strengths and hardships. Factor in the diverse educational backgrounds of teachers and it becomes clear that such diverse education landscapes require educators with diverse capabilities.

### Growing in diversity practice: Focusing on growth

Each child, family, and educator has his or her own unique culture of how to live, eat, sleep, talk, dress, play, think, work, and socially and emotionally interact. Understanding and honoring overall diversity is core to teacher preparation and to effectively working with children and families. The good news is that educators can grow in their understanding of diversity and what the family's strengths and challenges are, and as research reveals new understandings and effective practices, educators can improve strategies in working with children and families. Diversity competence is not something that just happens – it requires time, reflection, knowledge, and ongoing practice. Over time, educators will come to know the unique characteristics and culture of each family and child and therefore will begin to see where and how their practice should grow. Also over time, there will be change – change in the strengths and needs of children and families, just as educators own strengths and needs change. This evolving process of constructing an understanding of diversity compels educators to also evolve and grow in their practice.

“One of the most important skills we need to develop in Pre-K-16 teachers is their ability to build on knowledge that students bring into classroom, particularly that knowledge which is shaped by their family, community, and cultural histories.”

– Sherick Hughes

### Building a diverse set of skills supports diversity practices.

Educators can focus on building skills through professional development and in gathering resources (books, articles) as well as support, such as mentors. Answering thought-provoking questions can help gather directions for growing in diversity preparation and practice.

### In working with diverse children and families:

- What do you feel are your strengths?
- What do you feel are your weaknesses?
- What are your biggest challenges?
- When was the last time you received professional development, read articles, or participated in discussions related to diversity or diverse student and family needs?
- What did you take away from this and apply in your work?
- When was the last time you experienced or saw some type of bias? How did you feel?
- Have you experienced working with children who do not speak English or who are dual language learners? If yes, how do you support dual language learners and their families? If no, what do you think is needed to support dual language learners and their families?
- What do you think are important skills and qualities to honor diversity and the unique strengths and needs of children and families?

“In order for a children’s program to work effectively, there has to be genuine acceptance and acknowledgment of diversity and a firm belief that the constructive resolution of differences in attitudes, understandings, and perspectives often results in better outcomes, more creativity, and more efficient problem solving.”

– J. Gonzalez-Mena and A. Stonehouse

## Growing in our diversity practice: Engaging families

Supporting diversity within a program means knowing and engaging all families. As NAEYC states, “ A growing body of research suggests that meaningful engagement of families in their children’s early learning supports school readiness and later academic success.” (Henrich & Gadiare 2008; Wiss, Casp, & Lopez, 2006) Educators need to invite and interest families to become a part their child’s early learning experience. It’s important that families know that their ideas are not only welcomed, but are needed as equal partners in planning for successful experiences for their child.

From day one, all families need to know that the educator values and welcomes their goals, opinions, and dreams for their child’s early learning experience. Families from diverse cultural backgrounds may need even more support in engagement as they may not understand the communication styles and practices of the program. Attracting families requires educators to take a close look at their own communication skills and to look at the invitations offered to families. Positive goals for family engagement embrace families as learners, educators, advocates, and most importantly, as partners.

“Competence also means tuning in to others’ styles of communicating and relating, understanding that there are both individual and culturally based characteristics that affect relationships, and adjusting interactions and communication to fit individuals.”

– J. Gonzalez-Mena and A. Stonehouse

## Growing in our diversity practice: Finding shared meaning with families

- Shaping the family engagement practice will require both educator and family working together. Consider the following strategies referenced in the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework.
- Consistently connect with families to gather child information and parent observations to inform teaching. Support parent-child relationships in a way that values the culture and language of the family and recognizes how different cultural influences may influence family development.
- Engage with parents as equal partners in learning about their child while acknowledging parents’ premier role as their child’s first teacher. Engage in honest dialogue with families about their expectations and staff/program objectives.
- Help families identify their interests, articulate their strengths and needs and accomplish and/or develop goals. Use self assessments, surveys and ongoing conversations with families to reflect on staff relationships with families and identify areas for improvement.

### References

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