

The Value of Culture in Your Family Partnerships

HOW TO DEVELOP A CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING WITHIN YOUR PROGRAM

By Lorena Rodriguez

Many times I worried that it was not going to happen for me, but with encouragement from family, coworkers, and faculty, my dream has come true. I—a proud Mexican American, working mom, and mother of two—am just about to finish my bachelor's degree! I know my dedication to my family, my career, and to completing my degree has shown my two daughters that anything is possible. I'm proud that both are bright, goal oriented self-starters who will succeed as I have to become role models.

As I think about this month's blog topic, my own culture, and my own daughters' early experiences, something from my recent Human Development in a Multicultural Society course stood out to me.

In my course, I read that parents from some Hispanic cultures tend to regard teachers as experts and will often defer educational decision making to them. In contrast, European American parents often see themselves as being in partnership with teachers to support their children's educational experience. These cultural differences in value and belief may cause educators to make inaccurate judgments regarding the value that Hispanics families place on education (Samovar, 2010).

As I thought about my work at the McCormick Center, **it became quite evident to me that early childhood leaders play a critical role in helping teachers understand individual histories and ideologies regarding education and learning as well as the cultural patterns and beliefs of groups.**

REFLECTIONS FROM MY OWN EXPERIENCE

My own personal story makes me quite passionate on this topic. In 1999 my daughter, who was 4 years old at the time, was tested at preschool to see if she needed speech therapy. I knew that she would qualify for bilingual assistance because she had a speech problem. I was astonished by the results; the director told me that her speech problem was due to being confused by the two languages she spoke. She suggested that we stop speaking Spanish at home. I was hesitant to challenge the director's expertise. I eventually got the support of my pediatrician to advocate for my daughter's speech therapy needs.

I believe that the director of my daughter's preschool was doing what she thought was in the best interest of my daughter, but, one negative consequence of my daughter's preschool experience was that she

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never learned to speak Spanish. I often wonder how additional information about cultural diversity or the benefits of multiple languages may have impacted the director's opinion on my daughter's speech problem. Here are some ways in which you as an early childhood leader can help value the cultures of the families you work with.

Tips for Developing Cultural Understanding

- Learn as much as you can about the different cultures in your early childhood program. Once you are aware of some of the cultural differences among your staff and families, you may find it easy to be a more effective leader.
- Expose your staff to a wide variety of cultures throughout your program. If you ignore the cultural differences, you are more likely to create friction and tension. However, if you choose to accept and celebrate those differences, you may find them to be a great asset for your program.
- Encourage a positive environment by inviting families into your program. Asking families about their culture and beliefs is a great way to get to know them and what is important to them. Extend these conversations past the intake process at parent meetings or conferences.
- Encourage children and families to share their personal cultural stories. This can create an atmosphere of respect and will help children and families build a sense of belonging and trust.
- Consider keeping a calendar of holidays and events important to the families and staff you serve. This can help you keep the pulse of what cultural events and celebrations might be on the minds of the families in your program and help you organize family-centered events at times most appropriate.

Here are some more resources that can provide insight into this topic:

- *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs-A Guide for Change* by Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan, and John Nimmo
- *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards
- *Program Administration Scale* (Item 17) by Paula Jorde Bloom and Teri Talan

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