

Opportunities for Professional Growth and Family Engagement During Hispanic Heritage Month and Beyond

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS AND LEADERS

Hispanic culture is rich and diverse across the United States and around the world! What began in the United States in 1968 as a week-long celebration of the histories, cultures, and contributions of Americans whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America has grown into a month-long celebration acknowledged from September 15 to October 15.

During Hispanic Heritage Month, early childhood program administrators and leaders can highlight and celebrate the cultures and contributions of the groups and individuals with whom they work: community members, children and families, and colleagues. Additionally, Hispanic Heritage Month provides an opportunity to highlight the need to meet cultural needs, such as enhancing educators' preparedness to build on children's linguistic and cultural strengths. Finally, it offers a chance to develop partnerships or solidify relationships with other organizations focused on providing equitable educational environments.

The Hispanic community is expansive and varied, and the [Hispanic population](#) in the United States has grown by 23% from 2010 to 2020. Researching the historical and current impact of Hispanic community members on the field of early childhood education yields a wealth of information, from [ideas about supporting the use of children's home language](#) to celebrating ways to prioritize family engagement, from supporting educators as they begin their careers to enhancing the skills of those who have worked in the field extensively. [Books](#) for children can help guide classroom activities, families can contribute knowledge about [Hispanic festivals](#), and leaders can connect staff and families to supportive resources about the benefits of [bilingualism](#) and [celebrating ethnic identities](#).

Developing cultural understanding of your program's Hispanic families and staff members is an ongoing process for program administrators. Every enrolled family and staff member needs to be provided a sense of belonging, community, and interpersonal inclusion. Educators who can share their backgrounds, talents, and ideas are most able to provide the same support for their students. Wise administrators build time for sharing and collaboration into daily interactions with and among staff; they also consider individual backgrounds and strengths as they plan professional development to ensure expertise and culture are honored.

One of the most powerful ways to celebrate everything that children bring to their classrooms is to support and encourage the use of home languages in centers and schools. Teachers demonstrate they honor a child's culture when they foster their home languages within the classroom. Teachers show this respect by reading stories, singing songs, and leading activities in children's home languages. If they are unable due to limited language knowledge, other Spanish-speaking members can take the lead. Parent participation within the classroom serves as a language model for students and a means to integrate the child's culture within the classroom community.

It is also essential to intentionally begin English as a second language instruction using researched-based instructional strategies during the preschool years. As children acquire English as a second language,

there are often misunderstandings around proficiency. Although a child may speak English fluently, it does not correlate to academic learning in their second language. Children can use English as a second language within a social text within a year or two; however, it takes four to nine years to acquire an academic second language.

There are many benefits to fostering home language use with English as a second language supports in the classroom over time. Children who develop a strong foundation in their home language can more easily transfer their knowledge and understanding while learning English. Learning a second language builds connections in the brain and flexibility, leading to cognitive gains. Bilingual children have opportunities to access information in two languages and, therefore, are likely to make gains cognitively, linguistically, culturally, and academically, which may lead to greater economic opportunities. Read more here: [Early Language and Literacy Development Critical to Academic Achievement](#). When home language use is supported, it cultivates a relationship between school and home, a positive sense of self and culture within children, and stronger family bonds.

It's essential to support teachers' understanding of individual histories and beliefs about education and to help them learn about cultural patterns and beliefs of groups. This can help them understand the students and families they work with and select the best teaching strategies to meet their needs. You can find more about this in the resource [How to Develop a Cultural Understanding Within Your Program](#).

Classroom assistants may sometimes be the main point of contact with enrolled families and students, especially when they share the same home language or cultural background. This may mean that they learn essential information about [families' wishes for their children](#); they also have the opportunity to reassure families that [their children's needs](#), especially for social-emotional learning, are being met in the classroom.

Program administrators can regularly evaluate whether their staff members are able to meet the needs of enrolled children and their families. How have they been supported to learn about cultural practices and develop skills for communication? Do language barriers exist that are limiting participation? Families whose backgrounds differ from those of the staff may feel intimidated or uncertain about interacting with those they see as professionals and "in charge" in center- or school-based settings.

Partnering with community organizations to provide supports for families with these concerns and using online resources can help programs to prioritize family engagement that is culturally and linguistically responsive. In Chicagoland, one of these community organizations is [Latino Policy Forum](#). Online resources can be found in the [Head Start Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center here](#) and [here](#). As the school year opens, celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month can be a great way to begin intentionally supporting colleagues, children, and families year-round.

Links to additional resources are provided below:

- [The Children's Equity Project at The Center for Child and Family Success at Arizona State University](#)
- [Illinois English Learner Handbook](#) from the Latino Policy Forum
- [Quality for Whom? Supporting Diverse Children and Workers in Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) from the Migration Policy Institute
- [Discussion with Luis Hernandez, Silvia Juarez-Marazzo, and Yvette Rodriguez on how to support young Latino children in early care and education](#) presented by the CAYL Institute

- [How to Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month With Kids](#) from Parents®
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Winonah LaGrande is an Assessor and Training Specialist and a member of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force. Over her 15 years in the Early Childhood Education field, Winonah has worked in Chicago Public Schools as well as private early childhood programs with diverse populations.

Katie Gaul is an Assessor and Training Specialist and a member of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force. Katie has 30+ years of experience working with children, families, and teachers in various educational settings. She holds an ESL certificate and spent eight years working in Hispanic communities.

Erin Cetera is an Assessor and Training Specialist and a member of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force. She has 25 years of experience directing early childhood programs in a variety of settings and communities.