Engaging families from language backgrounds other than English in their children’s education

We know that family participation is associated with improving children and young people’s academic success and for families from language backgrounds other than English this participation is particularly important primarily because education is closely linked with the integration of families into the broader community.

A few things to consider…

- Multicultural education aides can assist in facilitating communication between the family and the school.
- Many families may not be aware that they are welcome to visit their children’s schools at any time. They may not be clear on what the school’s expectations are for their involvement, and these expectations may differ from their experience of education in other countries.
- In most cultures, teachers are highly respected and considered to be ‘the experts’. For some cultures, questioning a teacher may therefore be viewed as a sign of disrespect.
- Many cultures are relationship-oriented, where it is important to gain someone’s trust before discussing problems with them. Some families have suggested that developing an informal relationship prior to the school imparting ‘bad’ news would be of value for them.
- People from around the world have different orientations to time which can impact on processes such as making appointments ahead of time and keeping a diary, or showing up to meetings ‘on time’.
- Different behaviours are viewed as appropriate in different cultures. For example, families from group-oriented (collectivist) societies may be uncomfortable with teachers who praise their students individually as this singles them out from their classmates and may be perceived as spoiling them. Similarly, in cultures where elders are highly respected, families may be upset to learn that their children are ‘speaking up’ and sharing their ideas with their class.
- Some families who require an interpreter may not ask for one.
- Teachers and school leaders can have lower expectations for refugee students and may not utilise the capacity of refugee families to help educate their children and their classmates.

What can you do?

Cultural considerations

- Provide all school staff (teaching and non-teaching) with cultural competency training. For example, school staff should be aware of and respect religious and cultural holidays when planning school events.
- Make the first meeting a positive meeting – start to build relationships and trust before any issues related to behaviour or achievement may arise.
- Provide families with an orientation to the Victorian education system, their rights and responsibilities, and how families can be involved in their children’s education. Provide opportunities for families to share their experiences of education systems.
- Multicultural education aides not only facilitate communication between school and the community but also provide cultural insights in both cultures; for school staff and the parent community.
- Provide opportunities for families to sit in and observe their child’s class.
Language considerations

- Families may have a preference for the language/s in which they receive print information. This information can be gathered on enrolment. Translate important information so that all families in the school community are informed.
- Communication with families about sensitive or complex issues may be most effectively achieved through a meeting, working with an accredited interpreter.
- For those family members who are choosing to speak English, be patient. Try to imagine how you would feel if you were trying to have a conversation about your child with a teacher in another language.
- Use plain English. Choose your vocabulary carefully and be aware that some words have multiple meanings. Also, try to de-jargonise as much as possible – for example, not everyone will understand what is meant by the term ‘curriculum’.
- Recognise that families with a higher level of formal education may prefer written communication, such as emails or letters, as they may have a better understanding of written than spoken English.

Literacy / education level considerations

- Be open to new ways of doing things. Families from language backgrounds other than English contribute to the richness of the school culture.
- Be mindful of your own culture and how this influences your beliefs about child development and education. Think critically about your own level of cultural competency and where you may benefit from further development opportunities.
- Discuss with families, the critical role of strong oral language development as a precursor to early literacy, and as the basis for learning English. Encourage family members to talk with their children, to tell stories, sing, play clapping games etc. Dispel the myth that these families cannot help their children in school just because they don’t speak English.
- For family members who are literate in their first language, but not necessarily English, encourage them to read to their children in their first language.
- For families with some literacy in English, create reading and writing assignments that build on families’ interests.
- Develop family-literacy programs that build on and expand families’ repertoire of literacy practices and the contexts in which they can be used.

Logistical considerations

- Vary times of meetings and events at school to be flexible to family needs. Understand that meeting times may be viewed as somewhat elastic and that it may take refugee families time to adjust to appointments on particular dates and hours.
- Wherever possible, provide transport to events for newly arrived families, or help organise a carpool for family members who want to visit the school.
- Consider changing meeting locations to venues other than the school such as community centres or family homes.
- Help families access childcare, or occasional care so they are able to participate at the school.

Welcoming refugee families – considerations

- Have a systematic plan for engaging families – it won’t happen by accident.
- Involve community leaders from the various refugee groups and ask their advice on how to best create a welcoming environment.
- Be aware that refugee families may have experienced degrees of trauma and stress in their journeys to Australia. They may be wary of divulging their experiences and in answering questions about their family educational background. Give them time to settle, and a chance to learn about how education in Australia works, and build information about their children over time.
- Make sure that families are aware of the professional assistance that is available to them to help in the settlement process, especially when they have had traumatic experiences. e.g. Foundation House.

Further Resources

Cultural Competency Checklist [insert link]


Note: Research and ideas in this tip sheet have been sourced and adapted from Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services (BRYCS), Spring 2007 Spotlight, US Dept of Health & Human Service