Australian Education Research Organisation

Engaging with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

to support learning and development in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's early learning and development. This resource details strategies for engaging families from culturally diverse backgrounds, families with English as an additional language, and families from refugee backgrounds by elaborating on the 'promising approaches' outlined in AERO's family engagement for early learning practice guides (which target early childhood services with 3 to 5 year-olds).

The promising approaches outlined in AERO's family engagement for learning practice guides include:

- recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home
- supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development
- promoting a literacy-rich environment at home
- collaboratively planning and problem solving with families.

Context

Although each family's story and background are unique, this resource offers starting points for teachers and school leaders on how to ensure family engagement for learning through full access and participation for all families.

Before accessing this resource, take time to reflect on your own cultural and linguistic identity:

- As part of our own culture, environment or upbringing, we may hold certain unconscious biases or assumptions that influence the way we approach other individuals or groups.

- While biases may not always be negative, we do need to acknowledge and be aware of their existence and consider the potential impact these can have on others.

- When working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families, try to ensure you are not inadvertently applying any personal biases and assumptions that might influence how you engage.

- Sometimes it may be hard to identify these by yourself, so it can be worth discussing your experiences with your co-workers.

- You may consider participating in cultural competency training either individually or as part of your team to learn more about, reflect on and embrace diversity, and promote inclusion in early childhood.

For the purposes of this resource and all AERO family engagement resources, 'families' includes biological parents, legal guardians, adoptive parents, kin carers and out-of-home (foster) carers.

There are many different kinds of CaLD families, including those:

- from culturally diverse backgrounds
- with English as an additional language or dialect
- from refugee backgrounds.

Families from culturally diverse backgrounds

Families enter early childhood education and care (ECEC) services with a range of cultural norms, expectations and experiences. Questions to consider when engaging with families from culturally diverse backgrounds may include:

Family roles and responsibilities

- Which family member is the primary connection between the service and home environment?

- What are the roles and responsibilities within the family?

- How might gendered or age-based norms and expectations influence the nature of relationships between family members and ECEC service staff?

Cultural expectations around education and educational institutions

- How has the family previously engaged with education services?

- What norms, roles and expectations stem from this past engagement?

- How might this frame the family's current engagement with their child's education?

- Are Australian educational norms, such as play as a valued form of education, the same in the family's culture?

Social and cultural values and norms

- How might social and cultural values and norms influence family members' openness to share details about the child's home environment with ECEC service staff?

- What are the family's social and cultural values and norms around child-rearing practices, such as routine building, toileting and sleeping?

- What level of engagement do parents/carers traditionally express in their culture around supporting their child's learning?

- How do parents/carers prefer to discuss and deal with conflict and/or challenging behaviours related to their child?

Families with English as an additional language or dialect

Children from linguistically diverse backgrounds may have parents/carers who do not speak English fluently or speak an English dialect different to that spoken at the ECEC service. Family members may also have limited education in their home language. As a result of this, parents/carers might be reluctant to engage in some experiences, for example, talking with their child about what they have learned, or reading a book together at home.

Families from refugee backgrounds

Families from refugee backgrounds have been displaced from their country of origin due to conflict, oppression, or other factors. The conditions endured before relocation to Australia may have been unstable and traumatic. The process of leaving a country of origin and seeking refugee status may also have been rushed, risky or dangerous for a family. As a result, children's access and quality of education in their home country or while in transition may have been limited and interrupted. Further, displaced families may be at higher risk of having complex family structures, roles, and relationships. Research suggests that children from families with refugee backgrounds may particularly benefit from trauma informed, strengths-based approaches coordinated at the ECEC service level (Craig 2016; WHGNE 2012).

✓ Promising approaches

Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Families who feel they are working in partnership with educators and teachers are more likely to engage in practices to support learning and development at home.

The following are some considerations and strategies around recognising and supporting CaLD families with learning at home.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Based on their own background and experience, CaLD parents and primary caregivers may have different understandings of the role of the family in supporting children's learning at home.

- Foster a sense of partnership between the service and the family, as this makes families more likely to engage in practices that support learning and development at home (Smith et al. 2020). This could be achieved in the first instance by having conversations about resources available in the local community that link to learning experiences at the service – for example, local libraries, local cultural sites and outdoor environments.

- We do not recommend you simply tell families techniques or tools they should use at home, as the research evidence says this isn't an effective approach.

- Instead, determine what strategies families already use to support their child's learning and development. Some targeted guidance may be beneficial to families around their involvement in their child's learning, such as providing parents with regular updates about what is happening in the service so they can talk to their child about what they are learning or exploring.

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Work alongside staff to ensure that engagement is a partnership, rather than just parents/carers attending events.

- Clarify your service's stance on the role of the family in supporting children's learning and development. This will aid staff in engaging with families more effectively. This is especially important for communicating expectations to families who may have less familiarity with the Australian education system.

Reflection questions

- How do you invite and encourage CaLD families to talk about their child's learning and development?

- How do you show families that you recognise and value their role in children's learning and development?

Reflection question

- There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way to recognise and support family engagement in learning and development at home. What does or could it look like in your service?

✓ Promising approaches

Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development

Two-way communication has been shown to improve children's early learning and development. To be most effective, two-way communication should draw on the knowledge and expertise of both families and teachers and educators about children's learning and development.

The following are some considerations and strategies around supporting two-way positive communications and providing light touch updates about learning to CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Engage with families in a culturally respectful manner to help nurture trusting relationships and encourage two-way communication. Making time to understand the cultural background of a family is an important first step in conveying cultural respect. This cultural knowledge is important for developing a relationship of trust between yourself and a family, but also how this knowledge (or lack of) influences a family's interactions with service staff, as well as education more broadly. For example, understanding sociocultural norms such as the presence or absence of eye contact during respectful conversations can support positive engagement with families.

- Use inclusive language. Terms such as 'family' and 'parent/carer' as opposed to just 'parent' help to capture a range of family dynamics.

- Ensure that names are pronounced correctly.

- Low-cost, light-touch updates from services to families about learning and development have been shown to improve children's outcomes (See et al. 2020; Robinson-Smith et al. 2019; York et al. 2019), particularly for children requiring additional support (See et al. 2020; Cabell et al. 2019). For example, using digital applications that capture achievements can serve as both a positive communication tool as well as an engaging opportunity for children to celebrate their learning.

- Ask about and accommodate family members' preferences for how to connect about their child's learning (for example, video conferencing, phone, email or in-person). For linguistically diverse families, light touch communication via technology allows families to access information in their home language as needed, using translation apps and default language settings on their devices. However, not every family may prefer or be confident with the use of technology as a communication tool, so hard copy correspondence such as personalised newsletters or visual diaries should also be considered.

Reflection question

- How could you personalise light touch updates, keeping them positive, accessible and to the point?

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Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Consider how you make space in your service for educators and teachers to invite and encourage CaLD families to take part in conversations about learning.

- When you and your staff are establishing family members' preferences for how to connect about their child's learning, ensure these preferences are recorded. Gathering this information centrally and making it available at a whole-of-service level ensures consistency in contact and reduces workload.

- Some CaLD families may feel more culturally safe when engaging with service staff through remote methods and/or with the support of family friends whose children also attend the service. This feeling of cultural safety can encourage the development of trusting relationships with staff.

- Consider accessibility opportunities in all forms of communication, for example, consider making documentation and updates available in a range of languages where possible.

- Visuals can assist with access, such as colour-coding forms depending on topic and having staff names and photographs displayed at the service.

- Consider the need for translator services, normalising this practice as needed for verbal or written communication. This may also include connecting families to community groups or services that speak their primary language or are from their cultural background. Engaging bilingual educators and/or support staff may also be an option if they are available in your service or area.

Reflection questions

- How do you cater to differing levels of adult literacy, including families who speak language(s) other than English at home?

- Has your service consulted with families about how they'd like to be communicated with?

✓ Promising approaches

Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

A literacy-rich environment is where language in various forms (like talking, listening, reading, storytelling and visual arts) is part of daily life. This type of environment allows children to practice their literacy skills often, in functional ways.

The following are some considerations and strategies for promoting a literacy-rich environment at home for CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Support families from linguistically diverse backgrounds to develop literacy in their child's home language when they choose to do so.

- Research shows that exposure to literacy in one's home language does not have any negative impact on the capacity to learn English as a second language (Ríos and Castillón 2018; Poulin-Dubois et al. 2011), and that if a child has a strong foundation in their home language, they will learn a second language more effectively (Ríos and Castillón 2018; Collier and Thomas 2007; Poulin-Dubois et al. 2011; Center for Applied Linguistics n.d.).

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Consider how literacy-rich environments change for children as they grow and develop.

- Just because someone doesn't have proficiency in English, it doesn't mean they have low levels of literacy. They may just be better at conveying their literacy in a language other than English. As such, ensure the most appropriate literacy-rich environments for each child that can be accessed regardless of their level of English proficiency.

- Service leaders with experience building literacy across a range of ages and literacy levels are well-positioned to support educators/teachers by fostering literacy-rich environments at home and in the service. For example, service leaders can shape the range of texts available in each service and room. This can help ensure that texts are developmentally appropriate, accessible to all children and also present a challenge at a level suitable for each child. Providing engaging and accessible books within the service provides visible examples of books that can be used at home for literacy-building activities such as shared reading.

Reflection questions

- How can you support and encourage families to incorporate their own linguistic and cultural norms (for example, songs and storytelling) into literacy learning at home?

- Do you talk about what a 'literacy-rich environment' looks like at the service and what it may look like at home? Do you promote it as an extension of families' cultural beliefs/values and linguistic experiences?

Reflection questions

- How might 'literacy-rich environments' change as you learn about families' needs, and as you watch their children grow and develop?

- Do you share the positive effects of bilingual literacy? How do you promote and implement bilingual literacy both in the service and at home?

✓ Promising approaches

Collaboratively planning and problem solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem solving between families and educators and teachers have been shown to improve children's early learning and development. It helps to share responsibility for decision-making and learning. It can also ensure that everyone is using a consistent approach to addressing a child's unique learning and development needs. Collaborative planning could involve service staff working with families and children to identify children's individual goals (including developmental goals) and strategies for achieving these goals.

The following are some considerations and strategies around collaboratively planning and problem solving with CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for educators and teachers

- Problem solve with families, collectively agreeing how responsibility for decision-making and learning is shared.

- Facilitate honest but culturally safe conversations. For example, a family may not present a critical question directly, as it is not culturally appropriate for them to do so. In this instance, allowing an opportunity to debrief via email may be a suitable accommodation that provides space for questions and concerns to be raised. In other instances, having face-to-face conversations with cultural support in attendance may be more conducive to a successful discussion.

- Use discussions to identify children's interests, current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and needs. This information can inform the child's goals, as well as any potential avenues to achieve these goals. For example, for children that are new to early childhood settings, the very first goals might be 'settling in, and promoting a sense of belonging'. You might like to invite families to spend time in the service to share their expectations, see their child's routine in practice and discuss any adjustments or supports that may be needed.

Reflection questions

- How do you work with a child and their family to learn about children's interests, current knowledge, ideas, culture and abilities and use this to inform the program at your service?

- How do you work collaboratively with families to identify children's goals, needs and supports?

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The following are some considerations and strategies around collaboratively planning and problem solving with CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Services should ensure a consistent approach between families, educators, teachers and leaders for learning about children's unique identity.

- Communicate clearly and consistently with families. This will help to foster confidence that the service is an inclusive and safe space for them to seek advice or support and sets the tone for a service where family voices are valued and contribute to service decisions.

- Consider how your service uses practices that promote cultural safety, as this will maximise chances of ongoing collaboration.

- Support staff to regularly share information about children's learning and development in various ways, considering families' perspectives and ideas.

- Service leaders can support educators and teachers to involve other support staff and agencies in the collaboration and goal-setting process for each child. These assistance may include cultural supports, translators and health professionals such as speech therapists.

Reflection questions

- How easy is it for families to talk about their child's learning and development goals, to ask questions and raise issues or challenges? Do you consider cultural factors when talking about children's learning and development, and when questions, issues or challenges are raised?

- What communication strategies are currently in place to support children as they transition within the service or as they transition to school?

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Available supports

Support services exist to support family engagement between you and families from CaLD backgrounds. These services will vary based on your location, but it is important to investigate and be aware of what resources you are able to draw on. Some examples might include:

- migrant resource services, bicultural support services and services available through local councils
- interpreting and translating services, including educators and teachers within your service who can assist
- trauma support services.

If there are educators and teachers within your early learning service who can assist with interpreting and translating, consider whether they are also able to help families to build social connections through their own networks.

More information

The AERO website features further guidance, including practice guides, case studies, implementation checklists and promising approaches audit tools:

- Family engagement in schools
- Family engagement in ECEC