

Practitioner Brief: Culturally Responsive Practices to Collaborate with Families



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Luna is three years old and lives with her mother, father, and a 2-year-old brother. Luna's mother, Eve, moved from Vietnam to the United States four years ago. Eve is not a native English speaker but does communicate in English and usually does not request a translator when offered. She is Luna's primary caregiver, while her husband has a full-time job. Luna likes to dance to her favorite songs, jump on her mini-trampoline, and take walks in her neighborhood. She was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) six months ago and is learning to use a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to request her favorite toys. Luna attends an inclusive preschool classroom where an early childhood special educator (ECSE), Mike, teaches children with and without disabilities. Mike collaborates with an instructional team that includes an Occupational Therapist (OT), a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP), and two paraprofessionals.



In preparing for a parent-teacher conference, Mike reflects on a previous conference, in which he asked Eve what she thought was most important for Luna to learn. She shared her hopes for Luna to stay safe and be able to communicate with others. She also said, "But I don't know if we should be focusing on that now or if we should wait until later to work on those skills. I trust you because you are the expert." During that meeting, Mike and the instructional team updated Eve about what the team had been doing to support Luna in exploring different toys and playing with her peers. He encouraged Luna's parents to try similar strategies at home. Mike observed that Eve

listened carefully and thanked the team for their suggestions.

Since that meeting, Mike often wondered if the discussion was helpful for Eve and if Eve tried the suggested strategies at home. Conversations with Eve during drop-off and pickup times are brief compared to conversations with other parents. Mike wants to ensure that he can effectively collaborate with Luna's parents to partner in teaching Luna the developmentally appropriate social-emotional skills that will help Luna succeed.



Family-teacher collaboration is an essential element in providing high-quality early childhood education. However, as seen in Mike's experience, successful collaboration is not always easy even if professionals and families know its importance. This brief provides professionals with practical strategies for building relationships and collaborating with families from racially and ethnically diverse cultural backgrounds. We will identify potential challenges that early childhood educators might encounter as they aim to meet the needs of each child and family. Each challenge is paired with strategies that early childhood educators can use to build relationships and promote collaboration. At the end, we will demonstrate how Mike could use the suggested strategies to promote collaboration with Luna's family.

Why is Family-Professional Collaboration so Important in Social-Emotional Learning?

- ▶ Family-professional collaboration helps teachers get the necessary family information to provide individualized care and provides a way to share strategies for promoting social-emotional learning. By learning about families' culture, values, and practices, teachers can identify families' strengths and needs. Collaboration also helps families navigate unfamiliar early education system. Thus, family-professional collaboration provides continuity between home and the early childhood program, facilitates children's social-emotional learning, and prevents challenging behaviors.
- ▶ Family-professional collaboration is also critical when there are concerns about children's social-emotional development. When professionals collaborate with families to design interventions, they can identify strategies that fit the family's unique circumstances and support the family in using those strategies (Lucyshyn et al., 2002).



Strengthening Collaborative Partnerships with Families

Challenges	Solutions
<p>I (professional) am unsure if I am fully prepared to work with the diversity of families in our program. I don't know much about different cultural practices and beliefs.</p>	<p>You do not have to be knowledgeable about all cultures to work with families from diverse backgrounds. Culturally responsive practice uses the experiences and perspectives of children and their families to support them more effectively (Gay, 2002). Therefore, the very first step for working with families is to learn about each family's experiences and values by building relationships with them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask questions. Learn about the lives of the families you work with by using a resource like the Teacher's Guide: Relationship Building with Families.¹ Show that you care and value different backgrounds and perspectives. ▶ Invite families to visit the classroom. Create opportunities for parents to participate and share their culture.

1 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-relationship-building-with-families/>

Challenges	Solutions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Arrange a home visit or phone call. Learn what children enjoy doing with their families and what their typical day looks like at home. ▶ Share a positive anecdote about the child with families (in person or a daily backpack note). Show the family that you try to understand and respond to the child in a culturally responsive, respectful, and individualized manner. This can then open the door to conversation and relationship-building with families.
<p>When I ask families about their preferences or their goals for their child, some tell me that I should decide what needs to be done because I am the expert. How can I partner with a family while respecting cultures that distinguish parents from “experts”?</p>	<p>In some cultures, professionals convey positions of authority, and family members may not yet see the teacher-family relationship as an equal partnership (Turnbull et al., 2015). Consider yourself as a guide who offers resources available within the special education community. Families can decide whether to access the resources. Try the following strategies to use this approach:</p> <p>Engage in bi-directional communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Some families might come to their early childhood program with the expectation of becoming partners with their child’s teachers, while others may not. Open lines of communication between teachers and families set the stage for strong teacher-family relationships. ▶ The resource, <i>Making Connections with My Child</i>,² supports families in strengthening relationships with their children at home. This handout can help professionals initiate bi-directional communication with families. ▶ Learn about families’ unique practices, beliefs, rituals, or traditions. This approach will show families that we value their knowledge and insights about their children. ▶ Give families the opportunity to learn about how early education providers can be their partners in raising their children by sharing family-friendly resources or brainstorming social-emotional teaching strategies together. <p>Give families choices for engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Families may have different expectations about their role in formal education and limited time and resources to participate in their children’s education.

2 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-building-relationships-with-children/>

Challenges	Solutions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ask families how they would like to communicate using a handout like the Relationship Building with Families³ resource. Provide a variety of ways to engage, including newsletters, mobile apps, text messages, or parent communication boards (Check out the Communicating with Families⁴ resource for different ways that families can engage). ▶ Accommodate language differences by using translators. Google Translate⁵ is a free and easy-to-use resource that can help teachers communicate with linguistically diverse families. Use it to translate your newsletters or text messages to families.
<p>What if I am not aware of my bias or assumptions embedded in educational practices that can conflict with the beliefs and values of families?</p>	<p>We are all subject to biases! If you acknowledge and reflect on this, you have already taken an important step. You may then try the following strategies to start examining and reducing the impact of those biases.</p> <p>Understand yourself by asking yourself critical questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <i>What assumptions am I making about my role as a teacher and how families might perceive it?</i> ▶ <i>How much power have I been sharing with the family? How have I been blending the family's expertise with my practice?</i> ▶ <i>To what extent have I expressed a genuine interest in learning how the family understands and feels about their experiences with early childhood education?</i> (Turnbull, 2015) <p>Practice empathy by actively trying to take another person's perspective (Todd, Galinsky, & Bodenhausen, 2012).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Practice cultural humility by reflecting on your emotional reactions during difficult interactions or situations. ▶ Learn new ways of regulating difficult emotions. ▶ Practice paraphrasing (e.g., Saying, "I can hear how hard it is to be a parent some days" after listening to a parent's story about parenting challenges; Riess et al., 2012).

3 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-relationship-building-with-families/>

4 <https://challengingbehavior.org/docs/Communicating-with-Families.pdf>

5 <https://translate.google.com/>

Challenges	Solutions
	<p>Develop cross-group friendships. Developing friendships with people from different backgrounds can help you discover and reflect on your implicit biases and their impact on your decisions and behaviors (Davies et al., 2011).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Reach out to colleagues from different backgrounds. ▶ Attend events where diverse families gather for a common interest.

Conclusion

The strategies listed above are important to use with all families as we implement family-centered practices. However, we recommend that you focus on how you use these practices in a culturally responsive manner. We encourage you to be mindful of the importance of learning about and valuing each family's culture, understanding different family engagement choices through bi-directional communications, and recognizing your implicit biases. Becoming competent in culturally responsive practice requires all of us to consistently engage in reflective processes and continue to learn about each family's cultural practices. This commitment will lead to stronger relationships with families and more inclusive classrooms for all children.

Mike reached out to his colleague whose family member is from Vietnam and said he would like to learn about the relationships between teachers and families in Vietnam. His colleague told him that although the interactions are different for each family, she has observed that Vietnamese family members might not view teacher-family relationships as equal partners like many families do in the United States. So, Mike decided to learn more about how Eve likes to engage with him and the team. He sent Eve and other families a *Get-To-Know-Family*⁶ handout that asks for information about family routines, cultures, rituals, values and asks about their preferred way of communicating with school.

When Mike reviewed Eve's responses on the handout, he learned that Eve always reads Luna's backpack note and likes to communicate using that note. From then on, Mike used the backpack note to share a positive anecdote about Luna, followed by a simple question about Luna's interactions with her family. He also made sure to create bi-directional communication opportunities for the parents in his classroom (See an example activity in the *Teacher's Guide: Labeling Emotions*⁷ and the *Teacher's Guide: Positive Peer Interaction*⁸ resource.) so he understands how different or similar his practices are from family practices.



6 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-relationship-building-with-families/>

7 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-labeling-emotions/>

8 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-positive-interactions-with-siblings-and-friends/>

Additionally, Mike planned a home visit for Luna's family since he had only talked to them at school. While preparing for a home visit, he thought about different ways to paraphrase and reframe the conversation with Eve to practice empathy. Mike knew all of these efforts would be a critical way to build a relationship with Luna's family.

Six months later, at the next conference, Mike found the conversations with Eve more interactive. Eve shared that she tried using Mike's suggestions and that they were successful. She also came up with new strategies that helped Luna play with her cousin, and Mike asked her to share those strategies so they could try them at school. Eve seemed to like collaborating with Mike in supporting Luna's friendship skills. She also appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with Mike and the other teachers at school to support Luna's social-emotional development and looked forward to continuing to be an active partner with Luna's teachers.

References

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Additional Resources

For teachers:

- ▶ A collection of the [Family Engagement Resources](#)⁹ mentioned in this article.
 - [Relationship Building with Families](#)¹⁰
 - [Making Connections with My Child](#)¹¹
 - [Labeling Emotions](#)¹²
 - [Positive Peer Interactions with Siblings and Friends](#)¹³
- ▶ [Communicating with Families](#)¹⁴ handout

9 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-infant-toddler-family-engagement-resources/>

10 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-relationship-building-with-families/>

11 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-relationship-building-with-families/>

12 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-relationship-building-with-families/>

13 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/teachers-guide-positive-interactions-with-siblings-and-friends/>

14 <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/communicating-with-families-helpful-suggestions/>