



Getting Off to a Good Start: Positive interactions with diverse families

The adage, “You never have a second chance to make a first impression,” applies to school professionals who want to establish good relationships with the families they serve. For a parent from a diverse community, the typical challenges are often compounded by differences in language, culture, and traditions. The first contacts provide the opportunity for the family to view the school experience as positive and responsive. The following tips are designed to help you create and maintain effective partnerships with families, leading to increased parent involvement, and ultimately better outcomes for children.

Setting the stage for positive and productive family meetings

- Make it your school district’s goal to have interpreters available and involved in the earliest points of contact with families. Anticipate needs and proactively arrange for interpreters to be available based on a current demographic study of the families in your community.
- The first person who comes in contact with the family should ask about the need for an interpreter and translated materials. Do not assume to know what the family needs. Then, according to a predetermined process, the information should be relayed to the people who are working with the family.
- Call the parents before any type of meeting and answer questions they may have. Clearly explain the purpose of the meeting and the desired outcome. Explain who will participate and what they will specifically do during the meeting. Discuss the parents’ role and how they will be asked to participate.
- For in-home meetings, you may need to plan your visit around the family’s cultural and religious observations.

Conducting an effective family meeting

- At a first meeting, begin by sharing a little personal background information about yourself, including why you went into this profession and what you especially enjoy about it.
- It is essential to devote time to conversation and activities that will help to build trust. Expect that it may take more time to establish trust.
- Direct your comments and responses to both the mother and father. Let the family inform you if there is any preference in who receives information and makes decisions. Respect the family structure even when it is not your own experience and value system. It is not unusual for extended family members to be present. Recognize the importance, in many cultures, of designated community elders, spiritual leaders, and spiritual helpers, for whom families may go to for advice or approval.
- When the child has a suspected or diagnosed disability, it will not be unusual for the parent to initially say, “There’s nothing wrong with my child.” Acknowledge their viewpoint and recognize it may take time to develop enough trust in the relationship for the parent to hear and consider your input.
- There likely will be a need for you to provide an explanation of the process and systems involved. Even if the process and terminology was explained in a pre-meeting contact, describe them as you go along and invite the parents to ask questions.

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- During the meeting, the parent may seem to understand the information that is being communicated. If asked directly, “Do you understand?” parents may answer “Yes,” even if they do not. You will need to check for understanding in informal ways as you go along such as: “Does that make sense to you?”; “What questions does that raise for you?”; “Does that sound right to you?”; and “Do you know what to do next?”

Understanding differences in culture

- In many Somali and Asian families, it is better not to initiate a handshake unless the individual extends their hand to you first. Depending on the individual’s religious beliefs, physical contact may be inappropriate at certain times.
- Asian families may use a combination of Western and Eastern medicine, philosophies, and approaches, which may include the use of massage, herbal remedies, and other healing practices. Include these interventions in the child’s plan if appropriate. For example, if the child would benefit from occupational therapy (OT) services, find out first what the family may already be doing in the area of massage and incorporate the activity into the OT plan.
- Depending on the culture, the level of eye contact may differ from what you are familiar with. It’s important to not interpret lack of eye contact to mean disinterest or disrespect.
- Because of the historical overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, African Americans may be reluctant to have their children identified as needing special education services if the child has a disability that is not visible.
- Realize that for some families, immigration status may be an issue of concern. This can cause some families to be very cautious in the way they disclose information to you.
- If language is a barrier and no interpreter is available (despite your best efforts) keep the meeting to the sharing of general information. When there is a language barrier, it is not possible to accurately determine eligibility for services. If at all possible, avoid using children as interpreters. Plan for an additional session to meet the need for language interpretation.
- Even when the family speaks English, do not assume they can read, especially at the high reading level of many public agency documents. In a sensitive and indirect way, check frequently for understanding. If you are taking notes or completing a form, read what you have written to the parent as you go along and before giving them the document. If you discover the parent cannot effectively read the materials, offer to provide the information in a different format.
- At the conclusion of the meeting, end on a positive note by praising the child or family and thanking the parents for their valuable input and participation.