

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Family Engagement and
Cultural Perspectives:
Applying Strengths-based
Attitudes



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<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/building-partnerships-developing-relationships-families.pdf>

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Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes

Explore how understanding the cultural perspectives of families can positively impact relationship-building and family engagement efforts. Use this resource to review the following:

- Family Engagement and Relationship-building
- Perspective-taking
- Strengths-based Attitudes
- Reflective Practice Opportunities
- Practice Scenario: Aisha's Family
- Additional Resources and References

This guide is intended for professionals in the early childhood field. Individuals, groups of staff, and supervisors can use this tool as part of training and reflective practice and supervision.

“Parent” and “Family”

We use the words *parent* and *family* to honor all adult caregivers who make a difference in a child's life.

Parents refers to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents.

Families can be biological or non-biological, chosen or circumstantial. They are connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is the process we use to build genuine relationships with families. Positive relationships with families promote strong parent-child relationships, family well-being, and better outcomes for children and families. Understanding the cultural beliefs, values, and priorities of families is key to the family engagement process.

The Influence of Cultures and Languages

Families come to an early childhood setting with distinct family cultures that give meaning and direction to their lives. A family's cultures are complex and influenced by many factors: family traditions, countries of origin, geographic regions, ethnic identities, cultural groups, community norms, sexual orientations, gender identities, educational and other experiences, personal choices, and home languages.

The cultural beliefs of individual family members and the entire family inform decisions made about the child and the family. Cultures shape our views on key issues such as family roles and goals, caregiving practices, learning, education, school readiness, child behaviors, and the nature of childhood itself.

For many families in early childhood settings, their home languages play an important role in shaping the identities of their children. Cultural values and knowledge are passed down to children through languages, traditions, and beliefs.

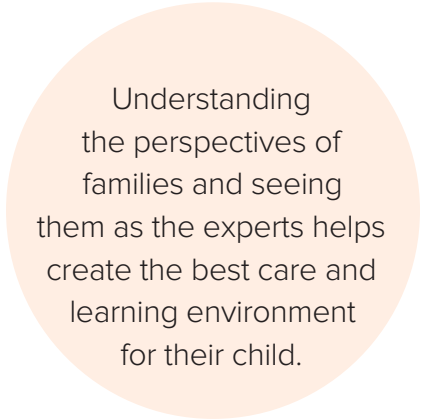
Relationship-building

At the heart of early childhood education is a commitment to provide the best care and learning environment for all children. Building relationships with families helps us create that environment. Understanding each other's cultural perspectives is an important part of building these meaningful relationships. In building relationships with families from linguistically diverse backgrounds, it is important to keep in mind that language helps children to understand their learning environments.

One part of understanding a family's cultural perspectives is to learn about their beliefs, values, and priorities. We need to know what is important to families and try to understand how that impacts what they want for their children.

We also have to understand our own perspectives. It is easier to see opportunities for connections with families when we know ourselves, understand our reactions, and take time to consider how the perspectives we bring from our lives influence our views of the families we work with.

Relationship-building requires us to resist making assumptions and to set aside our judgments if we disagree or think things should be done a different way. Even when there are differences we can always return to the commitment we share with families: providing children with care that fosters their healthy growth and supports their learning.



Understanding the perspectives of families and seeing them as the experts helps create the best care and learning environment for their child.

Care and Learning

While every child, parent, and family are unique, many of our conversations with families involve common topics. We can anticipate that there will be discussions about learning and language, daily routines (such as sleeping, feeding, toileting), expectations, new skills, behavior, discipline, and relationships with peers and adults. We also know that each family will bring unique perspectives to these discussions. Their hopes, choices, and goals are grounded in their family's cultures. Given the role of culture, it is important for us to ask ourselves regularly, "Where do cultural perspectives—the family's and ours—fit into care and learning?"



Reflective Practice Opportunity: Questions to Consider

Think about a family in your program. Choose a topic from the table on the next page and then follow the reflection outlined below.

Consider the family's perspectives on the topic and reflect on the following questions:

- What do you know is important to the family now?
- What are the family's expectations for the child?
- What are the family's expectations for the program?

Now, consider your perspectives on the same topic and reflect on the following questions:

- What is most important to you about that topic?
- What are your expectations for the child and family?
- What personal and professional experiences have shaped your perspectives on the topic?
- What values and beliefs do you think inform your perspectives?

Reflect on both perspectives:

- How are your perspectives the same as the family's perspectives?
- How are they different?
- How might this affect your work with the family?

Common Topics of Conversations with Families: Selected Examples

Caregiving Practices

- Crying, comforting, and soothing
- Feeding and eating skills
- Toilet learning—age, approach, language used
- Sleep schedules and routines

Role of Language

- Home language(s)
- Important thoughts, beliefs, and values that rely on an understanding of the language(s)
- Impact of the child’s language skills on the ability to communicate with family members

Discipline

- Goals for discipline
- Approach and strategies
- Goals and expectations about behaviors and limits

Independence and Interdependence

- Falling asleep alone or with the help of a caregiver
- Fostering self-care skills, such as putting on a coat or brushing teeth
- Expectations of the child’s role in a group and in the family

Learning and Development

- Expectations of what and how children learn
- Priorities—for their child as an infant, a toddler, a preschooler
- Idea-sharing about learning experiences and activities to use at home
- Role of play and other activities
- Relationships with other children
- Understanding of parent and teacher roles in children’s learning

Communication with Adults

- Addressing a family member
- Addressing a non-family member (e.g. teacher, doctor, faith leader, elder, family friend)
- Signs of respect or disrespect
- Greetings and interactions like “hello”, “goodbye”, “please”, and “thank you”
- Times when the child is expected to be silent or encouraged to talk

Strategies for Taking Perspective: Strengths-based Attitudes

Conversations with families require us to be open to seeing their perspectives. Sometimes we share the same perspectives and our conversations go smoothly. At other times, we are surprised by something or feel challenged. And at still other times our program cannot accommodate a family’s request. No matter the situation, it always helps to approach the conversation with the family’s strengths in mind.

Adopting a strengths-based attitude does not mean avoiding challenges. Instead it shows families that we want to work together with them to find a solution. In contrast, when we approach our interactions with a fixed or negative attitude, we may convey our distrust or judgment. They may feel that they can’t trust us. We may put up barriers to engaging families without realizing it.

We can use the following Strengths-based Attitudes in our conversations with families.

What is a Strengths-based Approach?

A strengths-based approach involves the following:

- acknowledging the strengths of families first
- respecting and learning from differences
- showing openness to adapting practice based on family preferences
- sharing decision-making
- approaching families as equal and reciprocal partners

Strengths-based Attitudes	Description
All families have strengths.	Each child and family have unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths first, even when there are challenges.
Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.	Families are the most important constant in children’s lives, and children’s healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
Families are our partners with a critical role in their child’s development.	Families make choices every day that affect a child’s development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
Families have expertise about their child and their family.	Families understand their children best and make decisions for their children’s well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
Families’ contributions are important and valuable.	Being open to families’ suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their children.

Using Strengths-based Attitudes in Practice

Review the following scenario, and identify the ways that the provider uses a strengths-based approach in her conversation with the family.

Scenario: Aisha's Family

Background: Ms. Jayla is an infant-toddler teacher in a child care program. Samuel and Ana have enrolled their six-month old daughter Aisha in the program. Ms. Jayla wants to begin a relationship with Samuel and Ana and form a partnership that will build over time. She wants to reinforce their expertise as parents and support their strong connection with Aisha.

Samuel and Ana's family traditions are important to Ms. Jayla. We do not know Ms. Jayla's opinions about feeding routines for infants and toddlers. We do know that she wants the best for Aisha and her family. Ms. Jayla knows that a strong relationship with Samuel and Ana will have a positive and lasting impact on the well-being of the entire family.

Samuel and Ana, parents to 6-month old Aisha, are in an enrollment meeting with Ms. Jayla. Samuel and Ana describe Aisha—her personality, their relationships, and their hopes for her time in the child care program. Ms. Jayla wants to learn about specific caregiving routines and starts with a focus on feeding and eating.

Ms. Jayla: I'd like to learn more about how Aisha is doing with feeding, and how you like to feed her. Would it be okay if I ask you some questions about that?

Samuel and Ana both nod.

Ms. Jayla: Thank you. We're looking forward to getting to know you and what's most important to you. Can you tell me about Aisha's eating?

Samuel: We feed her with a bottle. We just started trying to feed her new foods with a spoon.

Ana: She has been bottle fed since the beginning. She's always had a good appetite, but she doesn't really like the new food. I don't want to stop the bottle yet. I want to make sure she's getting what she needs.

Ms. Jayla: It sounds like it's important to you that Aisha continues to get fed by a bottle to make sure she eats enough, even while you're trying new foods?

Samuel: Yes. We want to make sure she eats well.

Using Strengths-based Attitudes in Practice, cont.

Ms. Jayla: That's great to know. We can definitely do that here. Do you want to talk about spoon feeding and how we might support your efforts to feed her?

Samuel: I think we'll keep trying the new foods at home and will let you know what she likes.

Ana: We'd like you to focus on the bottle for now.

Ms. Jayla: It sounds like we have a plan. Let's check in soon to see how it's working for you and Aisha.

Aisha is now 7 months old. Her parents asked Ms. Jayla to start adding solid foods one week ago. Aisha is now drinking from a bottle and eating solid foods at child care and at home.

Ms. Jayla: I wanted to check in with you about Aisha's eating. The routines you set up at home have really worked for Aisha here. How does this approach seem to be working for you?

Ana: I think it's working pretty well. She likes more foods than she did in the beginning and seems to be growing every day. I still worry about her getting enough food. My mother says I was a picky eater, and I don't want Aisha to be one too.

Ms. Jayla: Let's be sure we keep watching for that together. So far Aisha has had a good appetite here. She seems to like everything she has tried so far. I've noticed she is growing too, especially in the last few weeks. Have you seen her doing anything new?

Samuel: She seems very curious. I've seen her try to grab things more than before.

Ana: Aisha also seems more interested in other people. She's watching everything all the time.

Ms. Jayla: We often notice that children begin to reach for the spoon and small pieces of food at mealtimes as they develop and grow.

Ana: I have noticed that she is trying to pick little things up with her fingers but can't really do it yet.

Ms. Jayla: I'm guessing she'll keep practicing it until she really can. We've talked about how persistent she can be!

Using Strengths-based Attitudes in Practice, cont.

Aisha is 8 months and has been reaching for the spoon during feeding. She is also starting to pick smaller things up between her thumb and index finger (pincer grasp).

Ms. Jayla: Last time we talked about Aisha's eating I mentioned that children often begin to reach for the spoon as they get older. I've noticed that here recently. She has also been trying to pick smaller objects up with her hands. Have you seen that at home?

Samuel: Aisha is picking up everything now. We plan to give her a spoon but will continue to feed her with another. It's very important that she gets enough nutrition.

Ana: It's our job to make sure she eats enough.

Ms. Jayla: How do you think that is going at this point?

Samuel: I feel pretty proud of how we're doing so far.

Ana: Me too, but I just want to be sure we're getting this right.

Ms. Jayla: Aisha has grown so much since we've been working together. From the beginning, you've told me how important it is that she gets enough food. We want Aisha to get the best nutrition also. Can we talk more about what this means as she gets older?

Ana: I'm sure Aisha will want to feed herself—she's so strong-willed. But, we'll continue to feed her as well. My grandmother fed me until I was 4. And I fed her brother and sister until that age. Plus, I like that part of the day with Aisha. I don't get to see her very much during the week. Food is a big part of our family life. We love to get together with our families in a big group to cook, make my grandmother's recipes, and eat together.

Ms. Jayla: It sounds like a special time for you and Aisha, and an important part of your family tradition. We want to be respectful of that. As I've mentioned, here at the center we continue to feed infants like you do at home with Aisha. We usually also encourage children to explore finger foods when they are old enough to be able to do that. It sounds like that is different from what you are planning to do at home. We'd like to work with you to find the best way to balance what you're doing at home and what we do here as she grows and changes. Do you have ideas for the best way to do that?

Reflective Practice Opportunity: Questions to Consider

- How did Ms. Jayla use a strengths-based approach in her conversations with Samuel and Ana?
- Can you identify one or more of the following Strengths-based Attitudes she used in her discussions?
 - All families have strengths.
 - Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.
 - Families are our partners with a critical role in their children's development.
 - Families have expertise about their child and their family.
 - Families' contributions are important and valuable.
- What other strategies did Ms. Jayla use to build a relationship with Samuel and Ana?
- If you were in Ms. Jayla's role, how would you approach these discussions about feeding with the family?
- How do you approach potential differences in home and program feeding practices in your child care setting?
- Using a strengths-based approach, how would you build on these conversations as Aisha gets older?





Closing Thoughts

Understanding a family’s cultures takes curiosity, patience, commitment, and a willingness to feel uncomfortable at times. It also takes courage and humility to reflect on our own experiences and understand how they affect our attitudes toward families. And it requires a readiness to recognize when we have misunderstood or made a mistake.

Our interactions are always a result of cultural influences—ours and those of the families in our programs. Program expectations, routines, and policies also influence our conversations with families. It is our responsibility to be open to understand and appreciate the meaning of a parent’s choices, even if they do not align with our own preferences or the policies of our program. The process of understanding the cultural beliefs, values, and perspectives of others – as well as those of our own – is essential to effective family engagement.

Early childhood professionals and their situations are unique. How might these ideas work for you and your program?

What strategies do you already use to understand the perspectives of families?

What new strategies can you plan for and implement in the future to promote an understanding of the family’s and your own perspectives?

Resources

Best Practices in Family and Community Engagement Video Series:

- Partnerships for Change: Listening to the Voices of Families <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/partnerships-change-listening-voices-families>
- Program Environments: Responsive Programming for Migrant Families <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/program-environments-responsive-programming-migrant-families>

Cultural Backgrounders (Bhutanese Refugee Families, Refugees from Burma, and Refugee Families from Iraq) <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/cultural-backgrounders-various-refugee-cultural-groups-new-united-states>

Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/raising-young-children-new-country.pdf>

Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Birth to Five <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

Six Essential Program Practices-Program for Infant/Toddler Care: Culturally Sensitive Care https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/itrg/pitc_rationale_-_culturally_sensitive_care_508_2.pdf

Selected References

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