

Working Effectively with Families from Diverse Cultures

The special education system may be difficult to understand for some families of diverse cultures. Therefore, it is important that professionals have knowledge of the laws and various services to help families navigate this process. Individuals facing language barriers may need additional explanation about how the education system works to effectively advocate for their children.

- Language interpreters and cultural liaisons are in a unique position to help the special education staff understand the culture of the families with whom they are working
- Practitioners need to understand the family's culture to provide a respectful collaboration when determining the parent's concerns about their child
- If professionals are unsure about the family's culture and how it may impact the delivery of special education services, connect with the school district's cultural liaison to help understand the issues
- Compassion and understanding are critical. Professionals may be the first person that the family has talked with since learning about a diagnosis or since a concern was identified. It is important that professionals understand the family's culture well enough to understand where the parents are in terms of understanding the issues for their child

To be effective when working with families from diverse cultures, individuals need to accept and respect that families:

- Come from different cultural backgrounds, and uphold different customs
- Have ways of communicating that may be different from other families
- Have different traditions and values
- May be experiencing a fear of the unknown, and may need extra time to trust school personnel enough to share information and actively participate in the process

School personnel should have the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from their own. To do this, professionals should look at their own experiences, background, knowledge, beliefs, and values. These things affect how individuals respond to others. It is also important to remember that diversity goes beyond culture and extends to economic status, religion, and sexual orientation.

The following strategies may be helpful to consider when working with families from diverse cultures:

- Be open and responsive to families
- Help the family voice their concerns, needs, strengths, opinions and priorities
- Be sensitive, respectful, open and honest in all communication
- Understand that the family's attitude about school may come from different experiences and there may be a need for more intensive efforts to build trust with these parents

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- Acknowledge that some families may come from cultures where they are not expected to partner with schools, and they may need additional support in understanding the importance of a partnership between the family and the school
- Do not overwhelm families with information but make sure that they have enough information to understand the next steps in the process
- Provide families with the information they need to understand their rights and responsibilities in the special education process
- Do not make assumptions about a family. Always ask clarifying questions if there are concerns that arise

When school staff implement these strategies and respect the culture and values of the families with whom they are working, it leads to positive, trusting relationships with families. Through these relationships, families will feel supported and confident in parenting their children with special needs. Ultimately, this will lead to better outcomes for children and families.