

# Working with Newcomer Families

By Julie Dotsch

When educators see families as experts in caring for their children, they feel welcomed and valued. In LINC childminding programs, this is especially important. When families work in partnership with educators, the effects of separation anxiety and culture shock are lessened for children. Educators learn more about the child, including how to comfort them and how to integrate them into the program. Working with families also helps educators to understand child-rearing practices and to support home language development.

## FAMILY-CENTERED CARE

Family-centered care means that all aspects of the program are influenced by family input and circumstances and are designed and adapted collaboratively with families. The approach has many benefits. Children more readily develop stronger identities and get access to richer, culturally inclusive programs. There is less likelihood for misunderstandings, and families are more likely to receive appropriate support. Families can also act as wonderful sources for information and ideas.

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Strong, trusting relationships are not built overnight. It is important to look for and build on the strengths of families. Reflect on any biases you may have. Are there some parents you interact with more? Are there some you avoid or who avoid you? Are you open to hearing new ideas and accepting different perceptions? Families are usually in the process of settlement when they come to the program. Culture shock, depression and even post traumatic stress disorder are not uncommon. From the first orientation visit, during the gradual separation and through daily informal contact, educators can gradually welcome families into the program.

As families gain confidence in the relationship, they may share their goals for their child, some family

history and information about past traumatic experiences. Educators can use this information to build a relationship with the child, create meaningful programs and support the family.

## 10 Tips for Communicating with Newcomer Families

- 1) Respect different methods of child-rearing, as well as family goals and knowledge.
- 2) Relationships take time to develop. Hold back before offering advice.
- 3) Flexible approaches leave educators more open to learning and benefiting from families.
- 4) Listen to families. Have one caregiver available to interact with families at the start and end of the program.
- 5) Spend time getting to know families in ways that aren't just related to their child.
- 6) Speak often but briefly with families in social ways to prevent language overload.
- 7) Speak with every parent. Some parents will need time to gain confidence and warm up to you.
- 8) Match your language to that of the family. Speak slower (but not louder) for parents with less English. Enunciate for clearer understanding. Check for comprehension.



- 9) Caution is needed when handling any issue. Newcomer families may be more vulnerable and emotional. Notions of what is private vary greatly. Ensure confidentiality.
- 10) Be aware of non-verbal communication. It can vary tremendously across cultures. Eye contact, physical space, touch, animation and voice tone are some of the differences that may lead families and educators to misinterpret each other's meanings.

## BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

### Educator

The educator may have preconceived ideas or biases. They may feel superior or more powerful and show a lack of respect or interest. When they show empathy, keen listening and openness, they are less likely to judge families. With keen observations, they can learn how to read different emotions across cultures and can listen to the meaning behind the words that are spoken.

### Family

Families may be experiencing depression, culture shock or post traumatic stress disorder. This leaves them with weaker listening and focusing skills. It may also mean that they develop a negative approach to life because of their stress. Their levels of English may mean that they cannot understand the educator, which can build frustrations. It is wise for educators to simplify speech as needed and to ask open-ended questions to check comprehension. For educators who were once new immigrants, it can be all too easy to imagine that a family is experiencing what they did. It is wise not to make assumptions or to push families into sharing information as this may cause anxiety and stress. Instead, allow families to share as they wish.

## CHILD-REARING PRACTICES IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Child-rearing practices vary greatly across cultures and even within cultures. When the educator is aware of how the family carries out routines, guides behaviour, gives comfort and reinforces expectations, they can understand the child's behaviour more readily and can alter their expectations and help children learn the skills needed for the childminding program. It is important to support each family's child-rearing methods unless they are harmful to the child (e.g., hitting a child).

### Tips for Handling Sensitive Issues

- Listen first, then talk. Ask families how they see the issue.
- Be less agenda-driven/task-oriented. Ask open-ended questions.
- Get information ahead of time so you are sure it is accurate and complete.
- Have at least two positives for any one negative issue. Make it a discussion.
- Handle one pressing issue at a time and look for different perceptions, solutions.
- Keep each communication short. Interact a lot without an agenda.
- Be positive about families' strengths.
- Encourage families to find solutions and offer support for their decision making.
- When appropriate, offer a few options and don't expect conformity.
- Don't expect another person to see it as you do.
- Don't expect it all to happen right away.

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**Julie Dotsch** is an ECE Diversity consultant for her company One World. She is well known in the community for her interactive workshops and her specialized knowledge of immigrant preschoolers and their families. Julie can be contacted at [oneworld@sympatico.ca](mailto:oneworld@sympatico.ca).



17 Fairmeadow Avenue, Suite 211, Toronto, ON M2P 1W6 — Tel. 416.395.5027 | Fax. 416.395.5190 | [www.cmascanada.ca](http://www.cmascanada.ca)  
 Funded by: Citizenship and Immigration Canada / Financé par: Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada

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