

Supporting Immigrant Children with Special Needs and Their Families

Newcomer families are experiencing the difficult transition of starting life in a new country after leaving friends, family and their support network behind. As one of the first points of contact, your program's support is vital to all newcomer families, but especially to the success of children with special needs and their families.

In this tip sheet we will look at:

- How to approach a parent if you think their child may have a special need
- Developing a relationship with the families of children with special needs
- Communication strategies
- Where to turn for additional support

Approach the topic of a special need carefully and respectfully.

Newcomer families may or may not seem open to communication about their child's special needs for a variety of reasons. For example, they may or may not be aware that a special need exists, or they may not feel comfortable discussing their concerns about their child's development. They may also consider the special need a private family matter, or their child's special need may not have been an issue in their home culture.

In order to ensure that children get the support they need, it's important to note and communicate any observations about a suspected special need as early as possible. However, the way you approach the parent could affect how they respond, and you will want to approach the subject in a delicate and respectful way.

- Try to arrange a translator if you feel this will be helpful.
- Find a time to discuss your observations without the child present.
- Demonstrate respect for the family member and his or her culture and listen carefully to his or her responses.
- Reflect on your own values, attitudes, perceptions and culture. How are they affecting your interaction with the family?
- Provide parents with concrete examples of your observations and be prepared with a list of community support services. Offer to give them referrals, if necessary.
- Be positive, supportive and honest. Share examples of the child's strengths and



improvements with the parents.

- Reassure parents that information and issues related to their child's special need will be kept confidential.
- Keep in mind that what you identify as a problem may not be viewed this way by the family.
- Help the family to develop an action plan. Consider their suggestions even if they differ from yours.
- Reassure the family that you are happy to work with them to achieve the best outcome for their child.

For more information, see the Sharing Concerns about Special Needs with Parents tip sheet.

Take the time to develop a relationship with the family.

Remember that no one knows the child with special needs better than the family. By making an effort to get to know the family, you will learn about the child's individual needs and behaviours and will be able to create a more supportive environment for them.

Here are some tips for developing strong relationships with families:

- Show respect for the family's choices and opinions.
- Always make time for the family's questions and listen carefully to their responses.
- Share knowledge and obtain feedback, but don't make assumptions.
- Provide choices to empower the family.
- Recognize that the family needs to have the final word on their child's care.
- Encourage family members to participate in your program by helping with an activity or sharing a story, game or song.
- Provide parents with information about resources available in the community, then offer to help and be sure to follow up.
- Ask parents about the child's favourite toys, foods and games. Use this information to create a welcoming environment that includes the child's interests.
- Make sure that you ask how you can help.
- Tell the parents how much you enjoy working with their child.
- Share examples of the child's daily activities with parents (perhaps by using pictures) as a way to connect with them.
- Tell the parents what their child excels at and what's going well.



- Encourage parents to visit your program at any time.

Keep the lines of communication open.

It is important to develop a support and communication strategy for each child and family to meet their individual needs. Talk to the parents on a regular basis and, when possible, arrange to meet and sort out any issues or concerns. Also, be sure to ask the parents to share their observations about their child's progress.

A daily communications book can be a useful tool to develop two-way, individualized communication with the child's family. It is a record of the child's day. It includes his or her activities, progress and moods as well as upcoming events, issues and observations. Talk to the family about how they would like to set up their child's communication book. You can also involve the child by having them paste pictures into the book to show different activities they've done or experiences they've had in the program. However, when there are serious concerns regarding the child's care, emotional or physical well-being, always arrange a meeting to discuss them in person.

Reach out for additional support.

To read up on various special needs, visit the www.connectability.ca website and review the special needs fact sheets on the library page. You can also contact the CMAS office to request individualized support from the special needs consultant.

RESOURCES:

- Allen, Paasche, Langford & Nolan. *Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs: Children with Exceptionalities*, (4th ed.), Toronto (ON): Nelson. 2006.
- Ashworth, M., Wakefield, H.P. *Teaching the World's Children, ESL for Ages Three to Seven*, Toronto (ON): Pippin Publishing Corporation, 2004.
- Ryerson University, School of ECE, GRC Staff. April 2009. Weitzman, E, Greenberg, J. *Learning Language and Loving It*, (2nd ed.), Toronto (ON): The Hanen Centre Publications, 2002.
- Beyond The Journal, *Young Children On the Web, Supporting Families of Special Needs Children*, Louise Kaczmarek, January 2006.
- Learning Together: Tip Sheet, *Creating a Communication Book*. www.connectability.ca
- Parents as Teachers: Centre for Professional Development and Enrichment, 2008.

