

Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre

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Building Positive Partnerships with Families

Staff in child care centres, preschools, family child care settings and family drop in programs strive to make all families feel welcome and build positive partnerships in the care of young children. In our widely diverse communities, this can sometimes feel extraordinarily challenging. In order to develop positive partnerships with families, you will need to take some steps in order to be ready to welcome all families in your community.

1. Come to recognize and celebrate the full spectrum of family and cultural diversity.
2. Find appropriate ways to learn accurate information about the usual expressions of family and cultural diversity.
3. Deepen your understanding of the families in your community.
4. Proactively create a fully inclusive environment in all aspects of your program.

Celebrating Family Diversity

The first step toward building positive partnerships with families is to “assume nothing”. All families are unique – even when they share some similar characteristics or cultural identity. You need to get to know each family. Focus on each family’s uniqueness including its structure, home language, celebrations, traditions, rituals and other specifics of the home experience.

Everything you need to know will come from the child and his/her family. They are your best cultural resource! There are several ways you can help families know that you celebrate family diversity.

- State your commitment to diversity and multiculturalism in your parent information package. Inform families that yours is an inclusive program that honours everyone’s beliefs, values, language, ability and significant holidays. Invite families to share information about their customs and celebrations.
- At registration time, ask parents about the goals they have for their children while they are in your care. If there are any discrepancies between their goals and those of your program, take time to discuss them openly and seek common ground. Take time to communicate with each family and show an interest in the individual needs of their child.
- Use the registration interview as a time to learn about each family’s structure, cultural background and child rearing beliefs. It is okay to ask for specific relevant information; for example, “Do you spoon-feed your child?” or “Does he/she sleep alone?” Ask how you can reflect their family’s culture in your program. This could include familiar objects from home to help the child feel more comfortable. Providing opportunities for continuity between home and the child care setting shows that we respect the beliefs and values of each family. This promotes a secure sense of self and trust in others.
- Take time to greet all families when they arrive each day. This helps build a trusting relationship. Set up activities close to the entrance so you can supervise other children

as families arrive. This way you can be available to greet arriving children and participate in activities with the other children at the same time. Encourage children to greet families along with you. This helps to create a sense of belonging, and it is often easier for children to separate from their parents when peers welcome them and invite them to play.

- Create a family wall. Take a photo of each family and display it where everyone can see. As a permanent display, this reflects every family situation and culture that is represented in your program. Invite families to share photos of extended family members as well.
- Look for ways to communicate with families. Post multilingual notices and use pictures to help demonstrate routine practices such as toileting, hand washing, dressing for outdoor play, and so on. During the gradual entry period, you can observe individual parenting styles such as feeding, toileting and physical proximity. Parents experience program routines and can help children adjust more easily. This also creates a better understanding between the parent and caregiver perspectives. A respectful relationship sets the stage for identification and resolution of differences in common caregiving practices such as eating, cleanliness, toilet training, play versus academic learning and discipline. Write a positive note every week or so telling the parents something great that their child did or said in your program.
- Learn a few words or phrases in families' home languages. Although your pronunciation may not be perfect, the effort will be appreciated, and you will gain insight into the challenges families face in learning a new language.
- Create a book that illustrates your program's routine, and use it with families during the registration interview and the gradual entry period. Ask the parent to read the book to their child in their first language and to tour the centre explaining the routines and activities to the child.
- Offer snacks that reflect a variety of foods from other cultures. Parents can be a great resource for this. If the children enjoy food in the centre that may be new to the family, let parents know what these foods are.

Creating a Community of Acceptance

Your program must be a place where all families feel safe and validated for who they are. The environment sends strong messages of acceptance and belonging.

- Use visuals as much as possible. Remember that children who are learning English already have vocabulary in their home language. You can give them English words by providing as many visuals as possible. For example, make a book showing photos of each activity area in the centre. This will help the child who does not speak much English communicate where they would like to play if they are feeling shy. Accompany them to the activity they choose so that they feel safe and model how to play there. It is also helpful for children who are learning English to have visual cues around the room reminding them about the routines and where toys and other materials belong.
- During group time talk with all the children about various family structures, cultural practices and languages. Talk openly about what makes us all unique as well as all the

things we have in common. Topics such as family, me, myself, food, clothing and houses are just a few ways to explore and celebrate the concepts of same and different.

- Alter popular stories to represent the full range of family forms, cultures, languages and skin tones. Select stories that challenge stereotypes and expose children to alternative traditional heroes.
- Create a sense of belonging by helping each child find a buddy. Use circle time to present ideas about making friends and developing empathy.

Creating An Inclusive Environment

An inclusive environment is essential to building positive relationships with families. An inclusive environment is one where each individual sees him or herself represented in the visual images, every day activities and the play and learning situations they experience there. In inclusive environments, every individual is actively engaged in thinking and talking about how we are all alike and the ways in which we differ. In inclusive environments, we:

- **Recognize and Validate Family Diversity** by depicting all the possibilities of various family structures and groupings. Include multigenerational families.
- **Highlight Cultural and Linguistic Diversity** by exploring similar activities, items or concepts across cultures as examples of “many ways to be”, and labeling materials and activity areas in more than one language and script.
- **Present Racial Balance** in photographs and other human images by representing children and families of diverse racial origins. Avoid cartoon-style images.
- **Include Special Needs** by including children and adults with various kinds of abilities in theme materials such as self, families, communities and transportation.
- **Represent a Variety of Settings** including cities, small towns, villages and rural settings when depicting homes and communities. Try to depict Canadian settings wherever possible.
- **Show Caution in Making Cultural and Socio-economic Comparisons** by
 - Comparing ‘everyday with everyday’, ‘traditional with traditional’ and ‘exotic with exotic’ settings and cultural practices.
 - Avoiding mixing these kinds of images on posters or other visual displays of clothing, food or homes.
 - Ensuring that visual materials do not compare people in advantaged socio-economic circumstances with people in disadvantaged circumstances, or represent any group as impoverished, poorly clothed, poorly educated, poorly housed and so on – unless we are teaching about social justice issues.

More information:

Early childhood education for a multicultural society

Gyda Chud, Ruth Fahlman

Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press, 1985

Hand in Hand (kit): home and family unit plan and children's book

Jocelyn Graeme, Ruth Fahlman, May Henderson
Don Mills, Ont.: Addison Wesley, 1990

Welcoming newcomer families in child care programs: resource package

Vancouver, BC: Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, 1998

A guide to creating partnerships with parents

Mary B. Lane, Sheila Singer
Sacramento, CA: Department of Education, 1990

These and other resources are available through the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Library. Call toll-free 1-877-262-0022 or visit our website at www.wstcoast.org.

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