

Respecting All Families

An Excerpt from Teaching Tolerance's free kit, Starting Small: Teaching Tolerance in Preschool and the Early Grades

Schools that operate on a single cultural model will have difficulty providing meaningful services to all children. Teachers must be aware that universal lessons and activities directed to a “typical” U.S. child minimize learning opportunities because they do not take into account the unique family background and knowledge-in-progress that each child brings to school.

The following activities will help you discern and celebrate family diversity in the classroom. They will also encourage you to gain knowledge of other cultures, as well as deeper understanding of your own family experiences. Changes in your own and your students’ attitudes and behaviors and in your interaction with classroom families will help you evaluate and plan your program.

Value the cultural knowledge children bring to school by acknowledging family diversity through discussion, affirmation and celebration. For example:

- » **View linguistic and cultural diversity as strengths (e.g., bilingualism is an asset).**
- » **Use books and other resources that reflect all kinds of families.**
- » **Display pictures that children draw of their families, or have each child make a page in a class book titled “Our Families.”**
- » **Discuss feelings and experiences children choose to share about what makes their family special.**
- » **Avoid family-related activities that potentially exclude some children (e.g., holding a Mother’s Tea, making Father’s Day cards, creating “family trees”).**
- » **Observe a “Someone Special Day” and have children make gifts and invite significant others of their choice to school for breakfast, a play, a concert or other event.**

Build cultural continuity between home and school to encourage parent involvement in school activities. For example:

- » **Seek ways to communicate with parents in their home language.**
- » **Encourage and foster home-language learning by explaining to families that language skills learned in the home language transfer to the second language.**
- » **Invite parents to share cultural knowledge such as traditional stories or songs, or to demonstrate job skills or unique talents.**
- » **Participate in in-service training courses that will assist you in working with culturally diverse children and their families.**
- » **Provide workshops for parents on meaningful topics based on their interests and needs (e.g., classes on English language, parenting).**
- » **Identify any adverse social factors (such as poor nutrition, abuse, homelessness, parental depression, violence and drugs) that may affect your classroom families, and bring in experts to advise staff and/or small groups of parents on more effectively meeting the needs of children exposed to these circumstances.**

Explore your own family background as well as the diversity specific to your classroom community. For example:

- » **Examine how your ethnicity, religion, lifestyle and economic status guide your perceptions, attitudes and behaviors.**
- » **Invite speakers to your staff meetings to explain the basic tenets of religions practiced in your school community.**
- » **Use parent conferences and community resources to increase your understanding of the various cultural groups represented in your school.**