

# Getting Off to a Good Start:

## *Positive Interactions with Diverse Families in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education*

The adage, “You never have a second chance to make a first impression,” applies to professionals who want to establish good relationships with the families they serve. It helps to realize for the parent who has concerns about his or her child’s development, making the first call for help is often the most difficult part of the process. For a parent from a diverse community, the typical challenges are often compounded by differences in language, culture and traditions. The first contacts with the early childhood system provide the opportunity for the family to view the process as positive and responsive.

The following recommendations are designed to help you create and maintain positive partnerships with parents of young children from other cultures, leading to increased parent involvement, and ultimately better outcomes for children.

### **Setting the Stage for Positive and Productive Family Meetings**

- Make it your school district’s goal to have interpreters available and involved in the earliest points of contact with families. Anticipate needs and proactively arrange for interpreters based on a current demographic study of the families in your community.
- The first person who comes in contact with the family (intake person, screener, etc.) should inquire about the need for an interpreter and translated materials. According to a predetermined process, the information should be relayed to the appropriate person to make the necessary interpreter or translator arrangements, and to the professional who will be making the next contact with the family.
- Make a telephone call to the parents before the visit to prepare them for the meeting and answer any questions they may have. Clearly explain the purpose of the meeting and what the outcome will be. Explain who will participate and what they will specifically be doing during the meeting. Be sure to discuss the parents’ role and how they will be asked to participate during the meeting.
- When scheduling the appointment, ask about the family’s schedule and best days and time of day to have a meeting. You may need to consider the schedules and activities of other children and family members in the home. It may be helpful to schedule the meeting during a sibling’s naptime or at a time when another family member is available to care for the sibling. You may also need to plan your schedule around the family’s cultural and religious observations and holidays.
- While you may want to suggest that the family limit noise from television and radio or lessen other distractions during the visit, you also need to consider what is realistic for a busy home environment. If a quiet environment is necessary, you may wish to suggest meeting at another appropriate location in the community.
- Many diverse families show their hospitality and respect by offering refreshments to guests. If you are not able to accept food or beverages when visiting homes, share this information before the visit in an informal way, so the parent does not feel pressure to have something prepared or offended if you refuse what is offered. You may also wish to bring something, like your own bottle of water, with you so the family sees that you have what you need.
- Families often report feeling concerned that they will be judged for the appearance of their home. The extra demands of having a child with special



**PACER Center**  
8161 Normandale Blvd  
Minneapolis, MN 55437-1044  
952.838.9000  
952.838.0190 TTY  
952.838.0199 fax  
pacerc@pacerc.org

needs, as well as the size of the family, may make it especially challenging. Families may be reluctant to invite “company” into a situation that they feel may reflect badly on their family or on their parenting skills. If the family is reluctant to schedule a meeting in their home, you may want offer the option of initially meeting in another appropriate location in the community.

## Conducting an Effective Family Meeting

- Families are often wary of strangers in their home, especially those from outside their own culture. Even when you are pressed for time, it is essential to devote time to conversation and activities that will help to build trust into the relationship.
- At a first meeting, begin by sharing a little personal background information about yourself, including why you went into this profession and what you especially enjoy about it. Explain your professional role, why you are there, and what part you will play on the team in the future.
- In many Somali and Asian homes, it is better not to initiate a handshake unless the individual extends their hand to you first. (Depending on the individual’s religious beliefs, physical contact may be inappropriate at certain times.)
- When you arrive, state the length of the appointment upfront and do your best to end on time. Even when families have other activities on their own schedule, they may be reluctant to interrupt you or inform you of the need to end the visit. In scheduling the frequency and timing of future in-home sessions, take into account other meetings and times when professionals are interacting with the family.
- In Muslim homes, parents may need to take a break during the home meeting to observe regularly scheduled prayer times.
- Direct your comments and responses to both the mother and father of the child, when both are present. Let the family inform you if there is any preference in who receives information and makes decisions. Respect the family structure, even when it is not your own experience and value system.
- It will not be unusual for extended family members to be present when you arrive in the home. (These may or may not be blood-related relatives, but are still included as “family.”) The parents should determine who to include in the process.
- Be sensitive and alert to clues to the family’s emotional state as you determine what issues to address and how to address them.
- It will not be unusual for the parent to initially say, “There’s nothing wrong with my child.” Acknowledge their viewpoint and recognize it may take time to develop enough trust in the relationship for the parent to really hear and consider your input.
- Keep in mind that there likely will be a need for you to provide an explanation of the process and systems involved. You cannot assume new immigrants will understand the structure of the public education system and the associated terminology. Even if the process was explained in a pre-meeting contact, describe each part of the process as you go along, and invite the parents to ask questions at any time.
- During the meeting, the parent may adopt the appearance of understanding what is being communicated. If asked directly, “Do you understand?” parents may answer “Yes,” even if they do not. You will need to check for understanding in informal ways as you go along: “Does that make sense to you?”; “What questions does that raise for you?”; “Does that sound right to you?”; “Do you know what to do next?”
- In Asian homes, families may use a combination of Western and Eastern medicine, philosophies, and approaches. This may include the use of massage, herbal remedies, and other healing practices. Show an interest and respect for these activities. Include these interventions as strengths of the family in finding ways to work with their child. For example, if the child would benefit from occupational therapy (OT) services, find out first what the family may already be doing in the area of massage, and incorporate the activity into the OT plan.
- Expect that some homes will not have traditional western furnishings. Occasionally, you may be shown to a room with no chairs or furnishings on which to sit.
- Depending on the culture, the level of eye contact may be less than what you may be familiar and comfortable with. It’s important to not interpret lack of eye contact to mean disinterest or disrespect.
- Depending on the culture, individuals may also be more expressive, reserved, louder, or quieter than you are used to.
- If a parent seems unfriendly or resistant, do not take it personally. Recognize that the behavior is probably based on a previous unpleasant encounter with the system that had nothing to do with you.

- African Americans' behavior may differ from other diverse groups because they did not originally come to America voluntarily. Expect that it may take more time to establish trust. "First, do no harm."
- Because of the historical overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, African Americans may be reluctant to have their children identified as needing special education services if the child has a disability that is not visible.
- Realize that for some families, immigration status may be an issue of concern, causing some families to be very cautious in the way they disclose information to you.
- If an interpreter is being used, depend on him or her to be the expert on the language and culture, even if you have some familiarity with the language.
- If language is a barrier and no interpreter is available (despite your best efforts), attempt to build understanding in whatever ways you can, but keep the meeting to the sharing of general information. When there is an unresolved language barrier, it is not possible to accurately determine eligibility or services.
- If relatives or friends of the family are serving as interpreters for the family, be sure to address the need for confidentiality at the beginning of the meeting. If at all possible, avoid using children as interpreters. Instead, plan for an additional session with increased support to meet the need for language interpretation.
- Even when the family speaks English, do not assume they can read, especially at the high reading level of many public agency documents. In a sensitive and indirect way, check frequently for understanding. Offer to explain unfamiliar words. If you are taking notes or completing a form, read what you have written to the parent as you go along and before giving them the document.
- If you discover the parent cannot effectively read the materials, offer to provide the information in a different format, i.e., a tape recorded version.
- Allow enough time in the process for families to make decisions in the way that makes sense to the parents.
- Recognize the importance, in many cultures, of designated community elders, spiritual leaders, and spiritual helpers, for whom families may go for advice or approval.
- At the conclusion of the meeting, explain what will happen next in the process and provide an anticipated timeline for future activities. Encourage the parents to call if questions or concerns arise between meetings. End the visit on a positive note by praising a child or family strength and thanking the parents for their valuable input and participation.

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