





CHAPTER 1

Why Family Voices and Their Stories Matter

Guiding Questions

As you read this chapter, consider the following:

1. What's your story?
2. What has been your path to becoming an educator?
3. What was your family's role in your schooling?
4. What drives your desire to collaborate and work with young children, families, and the early learning program's community?

FAMILY VOICES

One of the things that I think can happen among administrators and teachers, and bridging that gap and building a healthy relationship with the parents, I think is first, we've got to feel like we're being heard. When I'm up there and I am coming to you with my concerns, I want to feel like you hear me—that what I'm saying is being considered, and you're trying to figure out what we can do to make this better. I want to be heard.

—Black mother in a single-parent family with a 5-year-old child

Each child who enters an early childhood program or classroom has a family and a story. *Family* is defined in different ways for different people. Children's relationships with family members, their family configuration, their family's socioeconomic status, and their cultural background and context are just some of the factors that affect their unique path of emotional and cognitive development (Fields, Meritt, & Fields 2018). When educators understand these factors and how they impact children's development and learning, they can better meet the needs of both children and their families. Educators' work with children and families is based on foundational studies and research. Research-based knowledge helps educators appreciate the role families play in their children's development and learning. It also helps them gain an understanding of their own beliefs and biases related to family partnerships and how these can affect their work

with families. Adapting educational philosophies and approaches to match the realities of the families you serve is critical to your work. Part of that work is getting to know each child and family, which requires intentionality, empathy, and understanding.

This chapter introduces my (the author's) journey as an early childhood educator learning from and collaborating with families, and it further explains why educators must provide the space, time, and opportunities to listen, learn, and reflect. My journey toward having intentional partnerships with each family was not automatic. It developed through a process of time, reflection, research, and experiences that shaped my beliefs on the important role of partnerships between early learning programs and families. It stemmed from conversations with families who insisted that I engage them in their children's learning, families who required that I view partnerships through a different lens, and families who told me what I was doing wrong and why they didn't feel comfortable completing certain activities I sent home.

Understanding Family

Koralek, Nemeth, and Ramsey (2019) define *family* as “one or more children and the adults who have sole or shared primary responsibility for the children’s well-being as the children’s guardian and primary caregivers” (6). These authors expand on this definition by stating that “family can include adults who are the child’s biological or adoptive parents, other close family members, or other individuals such as foster families and guardians who are committed to supporting the child emotionally, financially, or both. Family members may live in the same household or in different households” (Koralek, Nemeth, & Ramsey 2019, 6–8). By broadening the idea of who and what makes up a family, educators recognize that they will engage with diverse family structures, including, but certainly not limited to, families with same sex parents, heterosexual parents, a single parent, unmarried parents, and grandparents as primary guardians (Granata 2014; Koralek, Nemeth, & Ramsey 2019).

Likewise, educators will encounter diverse cultures, languages, traditions, beliefs, and behaviors that are passed down from one generation to another (Hammond 2015). Holidays, foods, types of dress, and daily routines may be different from one child or family to the next. Each of these contexts influence and inform whole child development and learning. The diversity families bring into the school setting provides context for collaboration, partnerships, and learning from one another. Engaging in these partnerships helps families feel respected, welcomed, and valued, and children feel safe and affirmed in an inclusive environment.

Why Family Voices Matter

Families are children's first teachers. Educators who acknowledge and understand this simple statement know that a dialogue about children begins with their families, and they respect the voices and perspectives of the families as collaborators in the development of the children. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, stated that “education is dialogue” and “the process of dialogue demonstrates that there is no fixed outcome, that all involved (including the teacher)

are open to new ideas and insights, and are willing to review, reflect on, and change their ideas” (Veugelers 2017, 414). Unfortunately, not all families are welcomed or feel a connection to their child’s early learning program or educators.

For example, as a first year teacher, my primary contact with families was during family-educator conferences, which occurred in November and March. During each conference, I would review the child’s report card and ask the family if they had questions. With this approach, I was unintentionally separating home and school. I believed that I was partnering with each family by sharing their child’s report card and my goals for the child; instead, I was telling the family what was going to happen. A better strategy would have been to involve and engage the family by asking about their experiences as well as the strategies they use with their child. Then, we could have collaborated in decision making and goal setting.

Recognizing that the voices of those who have been silenced are powerful is the important first step of meeting the developmental and learning needs of the whole child. This belief recognizes that a family has ownership over how best to support their child and acknowledges that without their partnership, fundamental insight into the individual development and identity of their child is missing. Through open and honest dialogue, all stakeholders work to build an understanding of an issue without the pressure to make decisions or be right. It opens the door for all parties to express ideas, desires, and expectations (Graybill & Easton 2015). True dialogue has the ability to link investigation, reflection, and action to change. Through dialogue and intentional active listening, stories are shared, experiences are valued, and connections are made. By actively listening to the children and families’ voices and stories, educators learn about the diverse contexts, stories, cultures, languages, and experiences each brings into the school and classroom environment. Active listening requires engagement, curiosity, and understanding. Educators listen to learn, and then they take what they have learned and build from it. In this way, educators start to build relationships with families, which ultimately lead to partnerships.

Throughout this book, you will read excerpts from authentic dialogues with families presented in the recurring “Family Voices” feature. Each dialogue raises the voice of one or more families. Some contextual information about each family is provided to illustrate their diversity. Although each story is unique, there are common threads that run through all of them that help to provide context for what families need from educators.

Creating a school and classroom space where all voices are heard and included requires suspending judgment; being open and receptive to learning, unlearning, and relearning; and having an unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion for all families. *Inclusion* is feeling safe, engaged, respected, and valued. Families need to know that their voices matter and will be intentionally included. They need to know that their opinions, beliefs, concerns, and ideas are valid, appreciated, received, and acted upon. Intentionally including diverse families’ voices means transforming the early learning program’s environment, processes, and policies versus expecting families and children to conform to traditional school expectations. “Through our stories, we call attention to racism and discrimination and assert our fundamental human

dignity” (Proctor 2021, n.p.). This means committing to adopting a mindset that values reflection, checking for implicit bias, and recognizing the strengths each family brings to the early learning program setting.

Equity is the relentless focus on eliminating inequities and increasing success for all groups by identifying who benefits from and who is burdened by and left out of schoolwide decisions (Nelson & Brooks 2015). Across all roles and settings, advancing equity requires dedication to self-reflection, willingness to respectfully listen to others’ perspectives without interruption or defensiveness, and commitment to continuous learning to improve practice. “Members of groups that have historically enjoyed advantages must be willing to recognize the often-unintended consequences of ignorance, action, and inaction and how they may contribute to perpetuating existing systems of privilege” (NAEYC 2019, 5). To counter institutional exclusionary practices that have impacted the perceptions of some families, including families of color and families with children with disabilities, teachers and school leaders must invite, include, and listen to the voices of those who have been silenced or ignored. These families must be viewed as equal partners who share the same goals and can help forge the pathway to accomplishing those goals.

Applying an equitable and reciprocal family partnership philosophy means understanding that meeting the whole child’s developmental and learning needs requires taking full accountability for initiating collaboration with each child’s family. Henderson and colleagues (2007) outline eight fears that may prevent educators from partnering with families, of which I highlight four:

- **Fear of being called racist or insensitive.** Continuously reflect on your biases and learn more about anti-bias education. Don’t be afraid to ask friends, colleagues, and families about outreach practices you want to use to receive feedback.
- **Worry about losing power and control.** The goal of a reciprocal family partnership is to empower the families.
- **Low confidence in families’ knowledge and judgment.** Families enter schools and classrooms with a vast amount of knowledge, experience, and talent. Capitalize on their expertise.
- **Breaking away from safe and traditional types of family involvement.** The first step is to get started and try. Start by making a phone call, sending a video of the child completing a lesson, or sharing a laugh with a friend. Whatever you do, *start*.

Distrust, Victimization, and Trauma

The early childhood education field must move beyond equating *family involvement* and *family partnerships* as synonymous. The difference between the two is that family involvement practices have the tendency to leave some families feeling powerless and unimportant in regards to their child’s education. Too often, educators leave marginalized families out of the decisions that directly impact their children’s learning and development. These families are told what is going to happen, sent information about interventions that will occur, or asked to attend a meeting where they are expected to listen but not provide input. Likewise, school- and classroom-initiated family training workshops have the potential to perpetuate structural inequities built on prejudices and assumptions about families. Ultimately, school-initiated

family training workshops leave some families feeling as though their voices are shut out or left out of the conversation. In addition, they may have witnessed school- and classroom-based practices and microaggressions that sent a perceived message that their voices, beliefs, and services are not wanted or valued. This all leads to families feeling distrustful of the school, victimized, or even traumatized.

Trauma is defined broadly as an experience or event that is a threat to yourself or someone close to you. Trauma comes in many forms, and it is not only the event itself but the response to the stressful situation and the undermining of the person’s ability to manage that response (Erdman & Colker with Winter 2020). According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN; n.d.), “some groups of children and families are disproportionately represented among those experiencing trauma. This means that they may be exposed to trauma at particularly high rates or be at increased risk for repeated victimization” (n.p.). Families who experience institutional and structural inequities may develop a distrust of and a sense of isolation in the school system. In other words, even during the early years of schooling, as early as prekindergarten and kindergarten, these families may have learned through experiences with their child’s school that the school system may not have their child’s or family’s best interest in mind. As research demonstrates about the impact of trauma, these experiences manifest as one of the three main types of traumatic stress reactions: re-experiencing (thinking about the trauma), avoidance (staying away from people, places, and/or activities because these reminders are upsetting), or the fight-or-flight response (NCTSN, n.d.). These behaviors are often viewed by school leaders and teachers as signs that families are uninvolved with, argumentative about, or unresponsive to their children’s schooling. In reality, families are responding to a type of trauma they hold that’s rooted in their past experiences with an inequitable school system.

Countering this narrative “requires attention to both *interpersonal* dynamics—the day-to-day relationships and interactions at the core of early childhood education practice—and *systemic* influences—the uneven distribution of power and privilege inherent in public and private systems nationwide, including early childhood education” (NAEYC 2019, 4). To promote equitable school-based inclusivity for all families, teachers and school leaders should intentionally evaluate school systems and policies that adversely influence their perceptions and practices, which could place barriers between families and their children’s school and classroom programs.

Three Keys to Reciprocal Family Partnerships

To help minimize the stress or anxiety families might feel when working with you, consider the following tips. These are values of trauma-informed care (Meeker 2015), but they can apply more broadly to any reciprocal family partnership (Erdman & Colker with Winter 2020, 77):

1. Ensure that when families meet with you, they feel physically and emotionally safe.
2. Be transparent and trustworthy.
3. Share decision-making responsibilities with family members.

Anti-Bias Education and Families

Early childhood educators should understand the role that anti-bias education plays in dedicating themselves “to self-reflection, a willingness to respectfully listen to others’ perspectives without interruption or defensiveness, and a commitment to continuous learning to improve practice” (NAEYC 2019, 5) that is underlined by knowledge about developmentally appropriate practice, which recognizes the individually, culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate goals for each child. In this approach, educators work to bring together knowledge about child development theories and anti-bias education to inform decisions that will promote equitable opportunities for engagement and partnership for all families.

Anti-bias education is a “commitment to supporting children who live in a highly diverse and yet still inequitable world,” and it “is based on the understanding that children are individuals with their own personalities and temperaments and with social group identities based on the families who birth and raise them and the way society views who they are” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020, 4). An anti-bias education approach asks educators to reflect upon the biases and beliefs that place barriers before individual families instead of honoring and supporting them (Hill, Newton, & Williams 2017). All educators enter their classrooms with their own norms, biases, and expectations. These norms are based on home experiences, cultures, and personal and professional experiences with the early learning program environment. They often lead to expectations about the knowledge a family should have about school as well as expectations about a family’s level of engagement with their child’s school and the classroom. However, an educator’s own norms and beliefs can impede on their ability to intentionally develop positive relationships with each child’s family to understand their wants, needs, concerns, and experiences and to capitalize on what they do versus what they don’t do (Trivette & Keilty 2017). Furthermore, an educator’s lack of cultural awareness can lead to untrue assumptions and negative outcomes for a child and their family (Kostelnik et al. 2019). An anti-bias educator is committed to reflecting on biases to ensure equitable opportunities for each child and their family. Embracing an anti-bias education approach “acknowledges that everyone has lived their lives in a system that is racist; that we all come with and act on biases, especially when unchecked or monitored; and that we are inundated with images and messages that influence how we think about and respond to one another” (Allen et al. 2021, 50–51). Educators must reflect on their own norms and beliefs as they strive to gain a better understanding of other norms and beliefs and partner with each child’s family to better serve that child.

Anti-bias education provides four core goals for educators:

Adult Goal 1, Identity: Increase your awareness and understanding of your own individual and social identity in its many facets (race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, family structure, economic class) and your own cultural contexts, both in your childhood and currently.

Adult Goal 2, Diversity: Examine what you have learned about differences, connection, and what you enjoy or fear across all aspects of human diversity.

Adult Goal 3, Justice: Identify how you have been advantaged or disadvantaged by the isms (ableism, classism, heterosexism, racism, sexism) and the stereotypes and prejudices you have absorbed about yourself or others.

Adult Goal 4, Activism: Explore your ideas, feelings, and experiences of social justice activism. Open up dialogue with colleagues and families about all these goals. Develop the courage and commitment to model for young children that you stand for fairness and to be an activist voice for children. (Derman-Sparks & Edwards with Goins 2020, 19)

My Work with Families

It's clear that all voices are not being heard. I decided to start listening. For over two decades, I have dialogued with over one hundred families, including linguistically and culturally diverse families, families from one- and two-parent households, adoptive families, military families, families from low-income households, and families of children with special needs. I conducted these dialogues using participatory action research, a methodology with the objective of handing power from the researcher to research participants, drawing on the experiences of the participants, and giving voice to the ones whose voices are often not heard or included in the discussion (Mammen et al. 2019).

Our conversations were loosely structured around the following questions:

1. What are your thoughts related to reciprocal family partnerships? How would you define reciprocal family partnerships?
2. What strategies does your child's school use to establish reciprocal family partnerships?
3. What characteristics do you desire from your child's teacher(s)? How have those characteristics helped to cultivate relationships and partnerships?
4. What characteristics do you desire from your child's administrator(s)? How have those characteristics helped to cultivate relationships and partnerships among all families?
5. What strategies do you suggest administrators and teachers use to promote partnerships among families with children who are culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse?
6. What are some ways you think teachers and administrators can partner with diverse families to better serve those families and the community?
7. How do school settings embark on a journey of ensuring reciprocal family partnership through dialogue?

During the dialogues, families shared their goals and dreams for their children and how their children's teachers, school leaders, and early learning programs could partner with them. Through these dialogues, stories were told about families who were eagerly welcomed into their child's school, families who were not welcomed, families who felt as if they belonged in a school community, and families who felt as if they were negatively labeled from the first

Voices of Families

Last year was rough because my granddaughter had teachers who did not understand her creative side, and they weren't concerned that she was already gifted and talented. She was bored in the classroom, and even now she's a bit bored with the reading level that they have her on. We're always pushing for more, but they want her to stay back to read with her class.

We have made several suggestions to the teacher to up her reading level and that she goes to a different classroom for reading. In her previous school, when she was in first grade, she read with the third graders. At this school, they would not allow her to read at a different level. They keep her, like I said, behind her reading level. We're having to, at home, push her and encourage her to read at her own level. We want the teacher to challenge her a little bit more. We don't want him to be offended by it and take it out on her.

—Black grandmother in a family with a third grade child



What isn't working is the strategies they have for my son. They are not proactive; they're more reactive, even though they know that he has a tendency to get excited and use his body or get frustrated and bite because he is not too verbal yet. He is developmentally appropriate for where he should be at his age, but since there are kids that are in his class that have stronger communication skills, I think that's probably another reason why he's a little bit more frustrated with himself, so he is acting out by using biting or hitting or slapping. He can comprehend and absorb everything around him, he just isn't able to verbalize yet how he is feeling.

I think for us, it is the way that they keep communicating to me that there's always something wrong. Being a teacher, I know how important it is to phrase what you say to parents in a productive manner instead of all of these problems that are happening and not being proactive. All of the solutions that I've put in place for my son have come from strategies I've learned from the resources at my school or just being a teacher and understanding child development and strategies that have to be put in place. He is a very gentle child, but he's got a lot of energy, and all of his reactions usually come from being overstimulated and he is usually happy. It's not an anger situation. I just want better communication. I want some more positive feedback. I don't want to just hear negative, and I also want to know what led up to the situation.

—White mother in a two-parent family with a 2-year-old child

day of school. What would often start out as a scheduled 30-minute conversation would end up taking hours because families simply needed someone who listened to their concerns, reflected upon them, worked with them to create solutions, and reassured them about their advocacy efforts. Families wanted teachers and school leaders who were willing to take the time to build trust, develop a teamwork philosophy, and dedicate time to learn about the uniqueness of each child and their family. They desired a school community that would be willing to acquire knowledge about each family and use that knowledge to build positive and reciprocal partnerships. Ultimately, families needed a trusting educator who would unwaveringly stand alongside them as they navigated this process we call *school*.

It's important to put yourself in the families' place to understand their expectations:

- › **Talk with me.** Ask, “What do you need, want, and expect from your child’s school?” Remember to provide communication in the various languages represented within the school community. Stand at the school’s front doors during drop-off and pickup, greeting families and engaging in dialogue that helps school leaders craft communication that is transparent and that promotes collaboration (Graybill & Easton 2015).
- › **Welcome me.** All families need to know that they are a welcomed, valued member of the school environment. Families want to know that they are part of a team composed of school directors and administrators, teachers, staff, and families who will put their child’s strengths, interests, and needs first. Placing pictures of families in the entrance; sharing instruments, dance, and traditional clothing; and putting displays in the hall to showcase cultures are examples of things schools may choose to demonstrate support and an inclusive environment.
- › **Listen to my ideas.** Acquiring intentional and thoughtful knowledge related to the families served affords school leaders, teachers, and staff the opportunity to better understand the vital role families play in young children’s lives. This knowledge helps inform educational policies and practices related to family engagement and to developing trusting reciprocal partnerships. Educators must seek various approaches to acquire knowledge that will foster a deeper awareness of the factors and the influences, such as cultural background, funds of knowledge, and family configuration, that impact development and learning. This will assist with better understanding the strategies needed to appropriately meet the needs of the children and their families by adapting philosophies that match the realities of the families served.

In my research, I have learned that families who felt connected with the early learning program and their child’s teachers experienced ongoing opportunities of respect, belongingness, and inclusion. They experienced school leaders and teachers who were relentless in their commitment to partnering with each child’s family by setting aside judgment in their attempt to connect. “To nurture a relationship into a partnership requires intentional time and effort” (NAEYC 2022, 145).