

Communicating family diversity and celebrations



There are strong messages in the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* that point to the significance of developing trusting partnerships with families and respecting family diversity. These are listed under 'Principles'. Trust and respect are the hallmarks of all good relationships and looking to the EYLF for guidance about how to enact that trust and respect is a great place to start.

Family diversity

Developing trusting relationships can take time and depends on the many factors informing each family's choice to place children in an education and care setting.

Some families are confidently able to share and disclose all sorts of information with centre staff. Other families take longer to get to know educators and may feel reluctant to share information that might feel private or exposing. This must always be respected.

Early childhood educators understand the importance of working closely with families and are genuinely interested in honouring diversity. Most make great efforts to develop the warm and trusting relationships that enable positive outcomes for children and work hard to communicate and establish environments and curriculum that foster inclusion.

But who are the people we're including?

One question often asked is how you know about the diversity that exists in the early learning community, especially if families don't disclose information? Part of the response to this question might seem obvious, for example, some features of our diverse community are easily recognisable because they are visible. While age, gender and some ethnicities might fall into this category of visibility, other important aspects about

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identity, such as religious beliefs, sexuality, family histories, cultural practices, abilities and interests, for example, might only become visible when families feel safe and are ready to communicate this information.

Most early learning centres do a good job of inviting families to share information on application for enrolment. However, it isn't always easy for some families to share everything at the very beginning of their new relationship with educators.

Several years ago, for example, two Taiwanese women came into our centre to enrol a four-year-old boy. I assumed they were his mothers, but they told me that one was and the other was his aunt. It wasn't until several weeks later that they hesitantly told me they were a couple. During that time, we'd developed a warm and trusting relationship in which they'd both spent considerable time in the centre, working alongside us to support their son's transition into an English-speaking environment. In their observations of our daily routines and their growing familiarity with us, they'd come to trust us enough to reveal a relationship they'd never divulged to anyone else. Recently, I attended their wedding as their honoured guest and was invited to make a speech about our treasured relationship forged in the safe and welcoming sanctuary of our little, very diverse, preschool.

Another question often asked, is how to respond to children's questions about family diversity. The simple answer is, with honesty. Families are, after all, the people you love. This shouldn't be too hard to explain, and children are generally content with this explanation of diverse family constellations.

We invite families to add photos to a large photo wall and children often gather to identify family members and to learn about others. We include resources that reflect diverse family structures and we always use inclusive language when referring to families.

The central and most important thing we do is to interact warmly, respectfully and thoughtfully with families. When families feel included and sense a genuine interest in them, trust grows and information exchange is more easily managed. Positive relationships and good communication enable all sorts of exchanges that lead to encouraging outcomes for everyone.

Children learn a lot through their observations of others, and when they see educators interacting warmly with their families they relax and feel more secure. They learn to recognise the significance of healthy reciprocal relationships and learn to interact in similar ways.

Celebrations

When it comes to communicating about celebrations we always acknowledge our diverse community by including them in our plans for celebratory occasions. Our early learning community knows we place a strong emphasis on reconciliation, and when we participate in smoking ceremony we inform everyone with a warm invitation to participate along with us. When families can come, they always do, and they frequently comment on the significance of the occasion and how fortunate they feel to be included in this ancient ritual of healing and cleansing.

Reconciliation is a central tenant of our practice, and over many years I've learnt that families deeply value this inclusion. While we don't overtly plan celebrations that represent the broader cultural diversity of our community, our focus on reconciliation acts to represent and acknowledge that this one common thread is something that can unite everyone, in all our rich diversity, as Australians. Everyone can come together during smoking ceremony. We meet on equal terms and everyone is included, regardless of their own visible and not-so-visible markers of difference.

Through smoking ceremony we've marked the beginning and end of the year, welcomed new babies, farewelled staff members, celebrated weddings, both gay and straight, and mourned the death of loved ones.

I understand that not everyone can celebrate in this unique way. However, I do believe that foregrounding reconciliation through the representation and thoughtful engagement with local Indigenous community members is a way towards the real inclusion of everyone. The one central tenant, that we are on Aboriginal Land each and every day, is the thing that positions everyone equally. All other celebrations are then at the desire and discretion of community members who, enabled and empowered through respectful relationships and communication, can plan for these together.

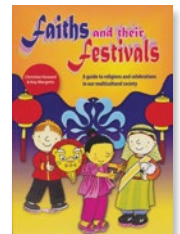
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