



# Engaging all Families

To increase family engagement in children’s learning, we want to make sure we create an open environment that feels welcoming at the school for all families to participate! Some families might not be aware of how much their involvement supports their children at school. Here are some strategies that we can use to engage families from diverse backgrounds in schools:

## **‘Waiting in the Wings’ Families**

Despite the many benefits of family engagement in children’s education, many families experience barriers to involvement in learning, resulting in what some schools may see as ‘hard to reach’ families. S4 has come to think of these families as **‘waiting in the wings’**, as they wait for the right opportunity to become involved in their children’s learning.

When engaging families as part of Start Smart Stay Safe (S4), it is important to consider diverse perspectives on parent engagement to create an inclusive environment for all families. Some parents/caregivers are waiting for the opportunity to become involved in their children’s learning in school; they may have not yet found a way to connect with the school in a way that works for their family (waiting in the wings).

## **Engaged Parents – Allowing Children Opportunities to Grow**

Just as there are families who may be waiting for their opportunity to engage at the school, on the opposite side of the spectrum, there are family members who may be very involved in schools and may have difficulties allowing their children the independence they need to grow and develop, to allow them to make choices to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. For these parents, it may seem easier to take over when children are facing setbacks. Instead, as part of the key messages in Start Smart Stay Safe (S4), parents and caring adults support children through their challenges, and allow children to experience success in building their own skills and abilities to use in the future. It’s important for parents to know a small degree of adversity can be an important part of childhood because it helps children develop problem solving skills and build confidence. Instead of protecting children from every single obstacle, adults can help children learn the skills and confidence to overcome these challenges on their own.

## **Use Culture to Inform Practice on How to Engage with Families**

Existing cultural traditions of families can be used to inform new definitions of family involvement at your school. Diverse families may have their own ways of involvement; different from dominant cultural approaches. Consider multiple ways of connecting with families at your school to support all families as part of S4. Connect with the family supports at your school to find out how to reach families in your school community! Do you have diversity supports connected at your school that could help develop strategies to reach families – whether to provide information or to invite them to family events?

Even if individuals share the same race or ethnicity, it does not mean that those individuals have shared the same cultural experience, so it’s important not to make generalizations about any individual and their experiences.



## Recognize and Acknowledge Family Strength

Parents and family members are active participants in the life of their children during school years and long afterwards. They are a child's "first and most influential" teachers and often their strongest advocates. Parents "teach, model and guide their children." They are the "big picture" team members in their child's education (Carter, 2003).

Families know their children the best and should be respected for that knowledge. Schools have a lot of knowledge about children, but they are not in the relationship for a lifetime. When schools understand and respect what families bring to the table then partnerships can grow (Carter, 2003).

## How Parents Can Support/Invite Other Families from Diverse Backgrounds to Participate:

Some families find it very important to include extended family members as part of any activities related to their child, so it is important to include invitations to all family members (if possible).

### Suggestions:

Many of these strategies listed below may already be a part of what is being done at your school. We hope that these suggestions will provide some additional information on how to connect with an even greater amount of parents. Here are some suggestions to create a respectful environment for culturally diverse families (Ortiz, et al., 2007):

- Help the family to feel at ease and, respected, and provide the opportunity for the family members to fully participate and contribute in activities they are invited to
- Use interpreters/translators as necessary
- Evaluate one's own cultural biases: It is virtually impossible to form opinions and impressions that are free from the influence of one's own cultural influence.

### Other suggestions:

- ✓ Invite individuals from diverse backgrounds to speak at the school during family events
- ✓ Organize workshops offered by ethnic community-based organizations to learn more about particular ethnic groups
- ✓ Organize a diversity training seminar for families
- ✓ Offer cultural snacks and food at your family events
- ✓ Learn from cultural informants, students, colleagues, parents and community leaders
- ✓ Identify a cultural guide, someone representing the diverse audience, who can teach about and help the educator enter the community. A formal or informal relationship can be developed with one or more cultural guides (ie: community leader, Centre for Newcomers staff, etc.)
- ✓ If families have accessibility issues getting to the school, set up a carpool system or offer rides to other families who might need support with transportation



## Explore cultural perspectives regarding gender

- ✓ Participate in activities and workshops to have a better understanding of the issues
- ✓ Work with school counsellors to convene focus groups that discuss gender differences
- ✓ Learn different expectations about gender differences for various ethnic groups

## Encourage interaction among generations

- ✓ Connect elders and young people together through programs and activities
- ✓ Foster a tutorial program for parents where they come once a week to work with students
- ✓ Collaborate with parents to translate popular book(s) in their native language during a culminating cultural event

## Recognize community

- ✓ Employ qualified community members to enrich cultural awareness
- ✓ Invite community members for input on issues about schools
- ✓ Acknowledge and discuss important cultural events
- ✓ Celebrate significant dates and events in students' culture
- ✓ Attend cultural community events
- ✓ Find out what newcomer/cultural support centres are available in the community and can they support engagement of families in the school?

## Research

Culture is defined as “A set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours, shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next via language or some other means of communication” (Ortiz, Flanagan, Dyrda, 2007).

“Cultural diversity refers to the unique background and experiences that have influenced, to the greatest degree, an individual’s development (e.g., physical, emotional, cognitive, social)” (Ortiz, et al., 2007). “Individuals of the same cultural background will definitely share certain tendencies, but they will not necessarily behave in exactly the same way. Other factors, including gender, age, socioeconomic status, area of residence, and level of education will also greatly affect behaviour, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, etc” (Ortiz, et al., 2007).

“Good decision making in working with culturally diverse children and families requires a solid grasp of the distinctive characteristics of race and ethnicity as limited markers of culture (Constantine & Sue, 2006).”

“There is probably no greater arena in which the influence of culture operates more directly than within the immediate family. It could even be said that each family represents a unique culture in and of itself,” (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, n.d.).



*While the school, family, and community connections field has traditionally paid much attention to cultural diversity issues, there is still more to be done to define and clarify “parent involvement” that occurs within various cultural and ethnic groups. Recent research studies have found that families often practice forms of parent involvement that mainstream school personnel may not always recognize. For instance, a study of marginalized migrant families of highly academically successful students in South Texas found that parents were not involved in the traditional parent involvement activities, such as volunteering at the school or attending school functions. However, they were very involved in that they instilled a strong work ethic in their children and shared their own experiences to emphasize the importance of a good education (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, n.d.).*

*Instead of trying to get diverse families to adopt more dominant cultural approaches to involvement, research suggests the need to capitalize on existing cultural traditions. Researchers need to build understanding about how involvement varies among different cultural groups and adequately capture those experiences in new definitions of family and community connections” (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, n.d.).*

## Summary

Depending on a family’s experience with schools in the past, some cultures feel as though when they become involved with the school, they are interfering in their child(ren)’s learning and may even be embarrassed to receive an invitation, (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, n.d.). Consider when invitations go out to families that family engagement is celebrated at the school; that it’s helpful for parents/caregivers to be involved in the event – not only for their children’s learning, but also to create community connectedness among the school and family community.

## References

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- Constantine, M. G., & Sue, D. W. (2006). *Addressing racism: Facilitating cultural competence in mental health and educational settings*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Ortiz, S.O., Flanagan, D.P., Dynda, A.M., (2007). *Best practices in working with culturally diverse children and families*. Retrieved August 16, 2012 from <http://facpub.stjohns.edu/~ortiz/psy661/Best%20Practices%20in%20Working%20with%20Culturally%20and%20Linguistically%20Diverse%20Children%20and%20Families.pdf>
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