

Communicating Across Language and Culture:

How do I reach out to parents who are immigrants?



Maria knows that communicating regularly with the parents of children in her classroom is important, but this year has been difficult. Many of her students' parents have recently come from other countries, and some do not speak English. These parents seem reluctant to enter the school. When she tries to speak with them, she is not sure if they understand. When she calls home, she cannot communicate with the people living in the household.

Building relationships with parents is an essential part of early childhood education. Parents can provide important information to help you understand children. They can also work with you to reinforce learning from school in the home. When teachers and families work together, children learn more and have a more positive attitude toward school. Teachers who engage parents in their classes can better meet the needs of their children, but reaching out to parents is not always easy. When parents come from other cultures, and do not speak your language, building relationships can be even more difficult. The good news is that there are many ways to overcome challenges, and working with parents who are immigrants can bring special opportunities and rewards to your classroom.

A Valuable Resource

About one in five children in the United States is the child of immigrant parents, and these families bring a rich diversity and strength to their communities. Parents from other countries provide a valuable resource for advancing the learning and well-being of the children in your classroom. Incorporating parents' experiences into your lessons can teach your students the diversity of the world through learning about other countries, cultures, and languages. Immigrant parents can share their traditions, foods, dances, clothes, languages, and unique knowledge with their children's peers. They can be valuable resources in developing bilingualism in children and contributing to a positive school culture. Teachers who establish relationships and communicate effectively with immigrant parents enjoy a partnership that benefits all students.

Understanding Challenges

The first step to reaching out to such parents is understanding their challenges. People come to the United States for a variety of reasons. Many immigrants come to the United States out of motivation and excitement. Others come because a situation in their home country forces them to move. As a teacher, you can play an important role in helping parents feel welcome and making the transition easier for their families. In order to help, you can learn about the following challenges a family from another country may be facing.

Different cultures

In the United States, teachers and parents work closely together to educate children. In some countries, however, parents and teachers do not talk to each other as often. It is important that you help parents understand the relationship of partnership expected between parents and teachers at your school.

Fear and stress

Some parents may be refugees forced to leave their countries due to war, persecution, or a natural disaster. These parents may need special help to adjust to new lives. For nearly all immigrants, coming to a new country produces some level of fear and stress. Parents may be afraid or nervous about speaking English. Parents may feel uncertain about their future and feel overwhelmed with the challenges of finding a new job, learning a new city, and adjusting to a new culture.





Family Separation

One of the most difficult parts of moving to a new country can be family separation. Often, one parent must stay while another parent leaves. Parents at your school may have left their own parents, their siblings, their extended family, and even some of their other children behind. In some instances, family members also go back and forth between here and their home country. These transitions can be difficult to manage, and particularly confusing for young children.

Maria decides to learn more about the families of her new students this year. She talks to the intake coordinator at her center to find out the native countries and languages of her students. She discovers that two of the families are refugees who came to the United States with the help of a non-profit organization. The next day, she discovers that while the mother and father of one of her students do not speak English, the Aunt speaks some English. When this Aunt picks up her nephew, a boy named Julian, Maria asks about the new family and learns that Julian's father was an artist in his native country and came to the U.S. for economic reasons. Maria decides to use what she has learned to reach out to the parents of her students

What Can I Do?

Learn simple words in parents' languages

A couple of words and a smile can go a long way toward bridging the language barrier. Hearing words in their native language can be comforting for immigrant parents, and if they know that you are learning at least some words in their language, they will be encouraged to communicate with you in English. If you wait outside your center in the morning to greet parents during drop off, they will feel more welcome, and this could lead to a better relationship.

Connect with community organizations

Organizations that focus on immigrant issues often help newly arrived families. You can call one of these organizations to help you engage parents. They may be able to offer interpretation services or give you insight into the needs of parents. They could also hold an open house at school to provide parents information about community services.

Use pictures around the school

Using nonverbal language coupled with pictures can help parents who do not speak English feel comfortable and learn about their children's activities in school. Here are ideas for using pictures at school:

- Take pictures of your students' daily activities and post a visual classroom schedule;
- Label classrooms by using pictures of animals;
- Put portraits of teachers and staff at the entrance to the school to introduce school personnel;
- Invite parents who do not speak English and give them a school tour.

Translate school documents

Once you determine the native languages of the parents of your students, you should translate school documents into these languages. You may use the following resources to provide translation:

- Organizations that focus on immigrant issues or religious groups may be willing to translate for free or a low cost;
- Local high school or college students may be bilingual, and could be valuable resources for translation;
- On-line Google translations are improving, so rather than asking for an entire document to be translated, use Google translator and ask the service or volunteer to check the final product.

Have events where English is not required

Many events that build relationships with parents do not require English:

- A potluck dinner that invites parents to bring a traditional dish;
- Student performances of song and dance that parents can enjoy regardless of English language ability.





Have meetings at school with interpreters to establish ties

Some meetings for parents require a high level of English in order for parents to participate. At these meetings, you should find an interpreter. Avoid using children of the parents for interpretation, as this can be embarrassing and undermine relationships between parents and children. Contact local organizations that help immigrants, local religious organizations that serve their community, or local universities to find if they have volunteer interpretation services. You may also ask other parents at your school who speak the same language as other parents, but whose English is stronger. These parents may be able to interpret, or know someone in their community willing to offer the service.

Bring parents into the classroom to share their culture

Even if parents do not speak English, they can still be valuable assets to the classroom. Parents can participate in the following activities that allow children to benefit from their rich culture and language:

- Read a book to the class in their native language;
- Lead children in a cooking or dancing lesson;
- Bring in pictures from their native country and show them to the students.

Find English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) services in your community and give information to parents

Many education and community organizations offer free or affordable ESOL classes for adults. These organizations may be local schools, religious centers, or non-profit agencies. You can find out about them by calling or searching on the Internet. You can help parents sign-up for these classes. Some organizations may offer an evening ESOL class for parents at your center if you have a large number of parents who can attend the class.

Build ties among parents at your center

Parents who have been in the country longer than others can help new parents adjust to their new life and the expectations of the center. You can identify parent leaders who are willing to welcome parents into the community and ask them to call or meet with other parents. Parents can organize groups to

provide support in accessing community services, talking about the challenges of parenting, and providing ideas to the school for how it can improve. These parent groups can be particularly helpful for immigrant parents, especially if you can connect them to other parents who speak their language.

Make a home visit

If possible, you should visit the homes of your students at least once during the year. A home visit will give you a deeper understanding of your student and establish a foundation for building a relationship with parents. For parents who come from other countries, visiting the home can demonstrate the partnership you hope to build with them around their child's education. Once you visit the home of parents, they may feel more comfortable about visiting the school.

The parents line up in front of a sumptuous array of dishes. They smile and laugh while looking at the pictures of their children around the classroom. Some parents use the basic English they've learned in an adult ESOL class to communicate with other parents. Others look over a document about school procedures Maria has translated into their native languages. Using an interpreter from a local university, Maria asks Julian's father if he could come in to help teach an art class to the children. Julian's father smiles and agrees. Maria schedules home visits with other parents to learn more about their children. She also shows them new books the school has ordered in their native languages and asks if they can come to read a story. Maria is excited about how this new community of parents will contribute to the learning of her students.

For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?

The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections

Parenting, Depression, and Hope: Reaching Out to Families Facing Adversity

Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools

Fostering Resilience in Families Coping with Depression: Practical Ways Head Start Staff Can Help Families Build on their Power to Cope
Understanding Depression across Cultures

Trainings:

Module One: The Benefits and Challenges of Engaging Parents and Perspective Taking

Module Four: Better Communication

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