Chapter 3

Early Experiences With Family Involvement: Strategies for Success and Practices That Make a Difference

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the impact early experiences with family involvement have on young children and their families, early childhood programs, and teachers. The author discusses the growing demand for early childhood services, characterized by a growing and changing society. There is discussion of developmentally appropriate practices and the ethical conduct of early childhood teachers as they navigate issues of social justice related to family involvement and engagement. The author presents findings from a recent pilot study to illustrate the successes and challenges experienced by eight diverse early childhood programs as they reflected on their family involvement practices. The author also emphasizes the importance of promoting equity and celebrating diversity through family involvement practices including examples, successes, and challenges that may arise.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is family involvement and why is it important in the early years?
- Using Epstein’s Six Types of Family Involvement as a framework, what effective practices were the pilot childcare programs using and where did they encounter challenges as they engaged diverse families?
- To what extent were the childcare programs’ practices to involve families equitable?
Early Experiences With Family Involvement

While “caring about” conveys feelings of concern for one’s state of being, “caring for” is active engagement in doing something to positively affect it.

INTRODUCTION

While it is established that engaging diverse learners in the early years is important, the concern for the involvement of families is more recent. For many children and their families, the experiences they have with family involvement in an early childhood program are their first. Childcare programs and their teachers have a responsibility to design curriculum and learning environments that are individually, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for each child as documented in the Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and revised in 2009. Early childhood programs are morally and ethically bound, as stated in NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct (2005), to work with families to the best of their ability to ensure that children receive equal access to a quality learning experience. Teachers are urged to use best practices to engage young children and their families, building meaningful and lasting relationships that will promote the child’s learning and development beyond their early childhood years. As early childhood programs aim to involve families, they are challenged by differences in culture, language, race, socio-economic status among other aspects of family identity. While the literature on engaging diverse families in early childhood is developing, the literature on engaging families of children with disabilities (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Hughes, Martinez Valle-Riestra & Arguelles, 2008; Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010; Trainor, 2010) and studies of specific cultural groups (Bigelow, et al., 2008; Civil, 2010; Hill & Torres, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, & Walker, 2011; Kruizenga, 2010; Williams & Sanchez, 2012) is well developed and can be used to think about how diversity impacts family involvement in early childhood. This chapter will discuss the value of and challenges to family involvement between early childhood programs and diverse families.

BACKGROUND

Families are a critical contributor in shaping their children’s values on power and privilege across gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and language (Bullard, 2014; Hyland, 2010). At its core, family involvement refers to the proactive engagement of families in various activities that aim to promote the learning and development of their child (ren) (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Also referred to as parent involvement, parent engagement, and family engagement, it is regarded as an important element of effective education and has been for more than 40 years (Horby & Lafaele, 2011).

Research clearly indicates that engaging families in their child’s early learning leads to positive outcomes such as school readiness and later academic success (Banks, 1993; Barnard, 2004; Drummond, 2004; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Gonzalez-Mena, 2008). Prior to entering childcare or school, the child’s parents/family members have been their first teachers and have been solely responsible for their development. The experiences a family has with school involvement in the early years will likely shape their views on education in the years to come. The benefits of family involvement include improve parent-teacher relationships, teacher morale and school climate, improved school attendance, increased parental confidence, and higher satisfaction and interest in their child’s education (Horby & Lafaele,