

# Engaging Families and Showing Cultural Respect

Families are the experts on their children and can share valuable information about their children's personalities, likes, and dislikes. Families are also the experts on their culture. Their cultural backgrounds hold rich stories of their experiences, values, beliefs, and what is important to them. When you partner with families, you have an opportunity to learn more about their culture and incorporate their culture into your setting in meaningful ways.

## Why Is Considering Culture Important?

**Culture** includes values, customs, general beliefs, beliefs about gender roles, and practices. It refers to a shared way of life. Culture influences the way a family communicates, their emotional expression, social interactions, learned behaviors, and family rules and norms. When children and families come to your setting, they don't leave their culture at home. They bring their culture with them. Culture also influences how families raise their children.

“Family engagement as defined by First 5 California refers to “relationship-based mutual, respectful, and responsive partnerships between families, early learning and care providers, and other related professionals to promote children’s development, learning, and wellness. Family engagement includes families as leaders and advocates for their child. Family engagement happens when early childhood professionals and families actively participate in an ongoing process of building and maintaining these meaningful relationships.”

*(First 5 California, State of California, personal communication, April 2019)*

When you are open to learning about families' culture, you have an opportunity to:

- Find out what is important to them, what they value, and how their experiences shape their caregiving practices
- Support and strengthen families' and parents' relationships with their children by supporting their learning and development at home
- Make connections between what children learn at home and the competencies you hope to nurture when they are in your setting (*California Department of Education and First 5 California, 2018*)



Families' culture can be influenced by many factors. Some of these factors may include:

- **Family traditions**
- **Home language(s)**
- **Country of origin**
- **Where families are raising their children**
- **Experiences in the country where families are raising their children**
- **How parents were raised as children**
- **Gender identities**
- **Ethnicities**
- **Race**
- **Personal experiences**
- **Profession and education**
- **History and ancestry**

## How Can You Learn About a Family's Culture?

You can learn about culture in many ways. You can read about or research families' cultures, or you may have prior knowledge about a culture based on your own experiences. Cultures can change as families grow and develop and as the world changes. Culture also has different meanings for different people. Families from the same cultural background may describe their culture in different ways. The best way to learn about families' cultures is from them.

Some families may be eager to share their cultural experiences with you. Others may require more time to get to know you and trust you before they become comfortable sharing with you. Establishing a level of trust matters to families and may take time.

As you begin to learn about a culture from families, you may discover that you and a family don't speak the same language. This barrier may be challenging. However, it is an opportunity to partner with other families, children, and staff and tap into community resources to help you communicate with families.

## Engaging Families: Showing Cultural Respect

As you engage with families and learn about their culture, you may find their culture is similar to yours. At other times it may differ. When you give families the opportunity to share their expertise about their culture, you are showing respect. Respecting families' culture doesn't mean you necessarily agree with their values, traditions, or child-rearing choices. Showing **cultural respect** means you acknowledge and honor a family's culture without trying to change them. Approaching families with respect also shows their children you respect and care about them. Children can tell what you think about them by the way you treat their family. Showing cultural respect can help you support children's development while building meaningful relationships with their families.

“What one knows about a culture is less important than the respect and the attitude of openness to the practices, values, and beliefs of others.”

*(California Department of Education, 2015, p. 10)*

## Engaging Families: Cultural Perspectives and Biases

Families bring their own points of view into relationships. You bring your own view of the world as well. These different points of view are referred to as **cultural perspectives**. Families' cultural perspectives influence how they raise their children (e.g., how they discipline and their ideas about toilet learning and sleeping). Your cultural perspective is influenced by your own culture and affects your view of families, what you deem as right or wrong, and how you think families should raise their children. Considering your own cultural perspective and how it influences your interactions with families is an important first step in building relationships.

When families' perspectives are different from yours, you may be surprised or challenged by their point of view. You may find yourself asking questions such as “Why do they raise their children the way they do?” or “Why can't they just do things the way we do them?” It is natural for humans to have different perspectives and wonder why people make the choices they make. However, these perspectives may lead to bias. A **bias** is a personal preference either for or against families based on your own perspective. Bias can sometimes lead to unfair judgment or treatment of families. Some people recognize their biases, but others may be unaware of the biases they have. This lack of awareness is called **implicit bias**. (For more information on bias see the **Module 4 Reference List**).

Implicit bias can become a barrier to building strong relationships with families because it can negatively affect how families are viewed or treated. Being aware of and honest about your own cultural perspectives, your biases, and the judgments that your biases may lead to can help you understand the feelings you hold and why you have them. Then you can examine them and take steps to overcome them so they don't negatively affect your relationships with families.

## Summary

When you build relationships with families based on cultural respect, you honor their view of the world and their experiences, even if their view is different from yours. You show cultural respect when you are open to learning from families about their children, about their culture, and how you can help them develop and grow. As you support and honor families' culture, you help their children develop and learn in your setting and at home.

To learn more about family engagement, check out the Family Engagement Online Toolkit: [www.qualitycountsca.net/FEtoolkit](http://www.qualitycountsca.net/FEtoolkit)

References for this resource can be found in the [Module 4 Reference List](#).

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (2018). *Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices*. To learn more about Family Engagement, check out the Family Engagement Online Toolkit, [qualitycountsca.net/FEtoolkit](http://qualitycountsca.net/FEtoolkit). Copyright © 2019. Facilitated and Funded by First 5 California. [qualitycountsca.net](http://qualitycountsca.net)

