

## **Working With Non-English-Speaking Families**

**By Lisa Lee, Associate Director, Parent Services Project**

MOST CHILD CARE PROGRAMS, like all human service delivery systems in the United States, make English their primary language. The use of English makes perfect sense. Communication between parent and family, though sometimes challenging, generally works. However, when parents are new to this country and the second language they are learning is English, communication is another story, one that doesn't always work.

In fact, a child care center can be a strange and uncertain environment to parents whose primary language is other than English. Though unable to bridge language barriers, parents feel the need to be part of a system which socializes their children. For many, education is viewed as their family's path to success. Like parents everywhere, they want their children to do well, yet many feel uncertain about a language and culture that is different than their own.

Difficulties in communicating, while also creating challenges for providers, are felt more intimately by parents. Parents who can speak English have much to hear about their child's day and experiences. Non-English-speaking parents hunger for information about their child. When parents attend meetings, they often endure long stretches of English before the translation comes...if it comes.

Power and knowledge go hand-in-hand with the ability to communicate. When language barriers exist, it is common to feel frustrated, powerless or alienated. Some parents equate lack of recognition for their language as a lack of respect for their culture. Although unintended by providers, parents may feel rejected and may isolate themselves further. Parents who don't speak English often feel bad about not being able to understand. Out of respect for the teacher, they may nod affirmatively to comments without truly understanding what is being said. Others may apologize that their English is "not good" and decline to participate in school functions or to take leadership roles.

For the child care provider, crossing language and cultural barriers has much to do recognizing one's own biases and attitudes toward people. One must consistently evaluate feelings and levels of trust and power in day-to-day interactions. It requires shifting from the expert role to one of collaborator and facilitator. It means understanding how communication, or the lack of it, affects feelings of power and the ability of individuals to be involved.

Parents and providers are more alike than different in our need to communicate. When a parent speaks another language, it is important to establish a relationship which is one of equality and respect from the start, setting the tone for the future. If parents feel embarrassed about their English skills, it is sometimes helpful for providers to share how frustrated they feel at not being able to communicate in the parents' language. This helps to break down any tinge of superior/inferior perceptions from the relationship, and keeps both on the same level as human beings.

Providers can also link parents who speak the same language with one another, encouraging informal support networks. Having someone who has shared similar experiences of being outside of the mainstream helps to create a sense of belonging. Parents count on one another, translating and problem-solving, or just commiserating about how difficult maneuvering through the system is.

Providers and parents can share a special bond. Both want to communicate and have to work very hard to do so. Unfortunately, many programs see communication as a one-way street. They place the responsibility on the parent to understand, to bring in the translator and to be the ones who lose out when the barrier is too formidable. It's an attitude that exists on an institutional level which is difficult to detect at times.

For providers who build true partnerships with parents, communication is a two-way street. Agencies work hard to reflect diversity of culture and language in staffing their centers. They translate notices in pertinent languages, finding resources to do so from staff, community agencies, colleagues and the parents themselves. Programs recognize the importance of the parents' presences and that ultimately both have a need and responsibility to keep the lines of communication open.

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