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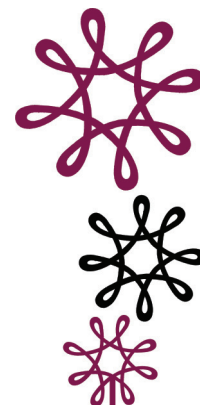
Connecticut Comprehensive System of
Personnel Development Council

How Can We Work Together?

Building Reciprocal School/Family Partnerships

Connecticut
Birth to Three
System

CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION

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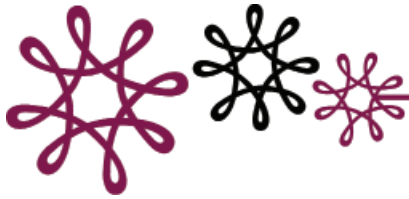
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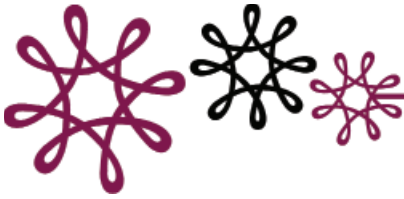
INTRODUCTION

Just as understanding child development enables the creation of effective classroom learning communities, understanding the role of families in their children's education enables the creation of effective school/family partnerships. The idea that a teacher could be an effective professional without direct pre-service experience working with children would be considered preposterous. Equally preposterous is the idea that teachers can be effective professionals without direct pre-service experiences working with families.

School-children in the United States have two primary socialization agents: their families and their schools. In too many American schools, there is a fundamental disconnect between these two primary agents. Educators ask the question: "How can schools get families to support our values and practices?" Families ask the question: "How can we get schools to support our goals and needs for our children?" A partnership approach requires the question: "How can we work together to promote the educational growth and achievement of our students?" Until educators are willing to meet families and community members where they are culturally, ethnically, racially, linguistically, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, they will not be able to establish trusting, reciprocal partnerships with them.

This curriculum has been developed in response to an extensive body of research that establishes the fundamental importance of reciprocal, respectful professional/family partnerships in the academic success of children and youth.

A brief description of each unit follows.

Introduction:

This section discusses the importance of the relationship between schools and families in building a comprehensive system of supports for students. Included in this section are responses from parents to the question of "What Do You Want for Your Children?"

Approximately: 9 minutes

Unit 1: School Climate and Culture

This unit will assist participants in identifying the most important aspects of a welcoming school climate and culture, understanding how to learn about diverse communities, and using best practices to enhance school/family partnerships.

Approximately: 23 minutes

Unit 2: Culture and Families

This unit will assist participants in understanding culture as a complex interactive and fluid process, identifying their personal cultural assumptions and practices, recognizing the uniqueness of individual families, and understanding the ways in which race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, and disability influence cultural values and beliefs.

Approximately: 22 minutes

Unit 3: Communication and Relationship Building

This unit will assist participants in building on family and community strengths to foster positive partnerships, using effective communication strategies to learn about the daily lives, beliefs, and practices of others, and developing strategies to enhance effective school-family collaboration in individualized educational planning.

Approximately: 53 minutes

## Unit 4: Family Systems and Parenting

This unit will assist participants in gaining insight into the nature of families and parenting as a cultural and developmental process, understanding the basic concepts of family systems theory, observing and understanding caregiving roles, and developing effective strategies for identifying and building on family strengths.

Approximately: 24 minutes
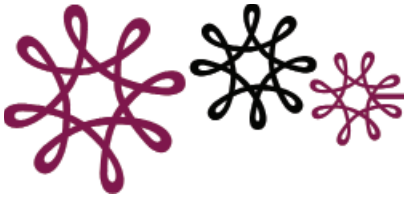
How to Use This Video and Manual

This video includes an introduction and four curriculum units, which may be used separately and in any order to facilitate culturally responsive inclusive practices in existing pre-service education courses or professional development programs. Each video segment includes interviews with educators and parents designed to provide authentic perspectives on school/family partnership experiences. This guide includes suggestions for introducing each unit, discussion points for each unit, assignments, and resource lists for professors, facilitators, and participants.

These activities may elicit many different reactions. Facilitators should be prepared for participants to disagree about the concerns and issues presented and to react both positively and negatively to the video segments and assignment activities. These reactions are often reflections of the participant's own family history or cultural expectations. Identifying and accepting the experiences and cultural assumptions of oneself and others is the foundation upon which the competencies addressed in this curriculum are built. Facilitators should allow time for reactions, questions, and concerns, if any, to emerge and be discussed in a safe and inclusive environment. Such open discussion will provide opportunities for self-awareness as participants work to define best practices in the light of their personal experiences, values, and beliefs.

Icon Descriptions

Participant (Student) Objectives: These bulleted lists describe what concepts participants or students can hope to learn after completing the unit.

Suggested Presentation of Concepts for the Facilitator Before Viewing the Video: These sections include key ideas, and in some units definitions, that are fundamental points that need to be presented before proceeding to the video.

Show Video: At this point in the unit, please show the video.

Discussion Questions: The discussion questions are designed to be asked after the video to promote in-depth thinking around the presented concepts.

Final Discussion Points: These points are can used to further enrich conversations after viewing the video.

Suggested Assignment: Assignments are a way to further reinforce and broaden the concepts presented in each unit.
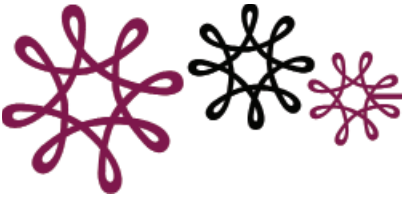
-1-
SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

Description

This unit will emphasize the relationship between families and educators as the key to a positive school climate and culture that facilitates the growth, development, and academic success of all children.

Participant (Student) Objectives

- ❏ Identify the most important aspects of a welcoming school climate from a family's perspective.
- ❏ Describe effective strategies to assist teachers in learning about communities.
- ❏ Examine positive school/family partnerships.

Suggested Presentation of Concepts for the Facilitator Before Viewing the Video

Effective school/family collaboration requires that parents and educators share common goals, see each other as equals, and support the students' education wholeheartedly.

Show the School Climate and Culture Unit of the Video (Unit 1)

Discussion Questions

1. For those of you who could not understand the Spanish-speaking parent and grandparent in the introduction to this video, how did listening to them make you feel? Do you think they often feel the same way when they leave their homes? How might you make them feel more comfortable? How would a school find an interpreter for the parent(s) with a child with an individualized education program (IEP), which is required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act? [IDEA 2004, §300.322(e)]. What might be some of the most important elements of a welcoming school climate for non-English and English speaking families?

Participant responses on the last question should include: warm greetings from all staff in building; a sense of belonging and acceptance; families feel that staff are approachable, welcome their contributions, and respect and seek to understand them; school provides a safe and disciplined learning environment; evidence that diverse and non-traditional families are represented visibly; confidence that staff will take the time to listen to and get to know each child and family member; evidence that educators will consistently make the effort to get to know and understand the cultural and community contexts of the lives of the children and their families.

English translation of Spanish-speaking dialogue from the video introduction:

> *Mother standing in the park:*
> I am from Honduras and my children are from the United States. I want the best for them. I like the school that they attend because my son David has learned a lot and my daughter has also learned a lot. She already knows English. I need the best for them. My son attends Head Start. I like how they are treated and I want the best for them.
>
> *Grandmother with grandson:*
> Speaking with teachers is progress. This way you can explain any problems the children may have and how she can respond in school. Even though the teacher speaks English, there is an interpreter. However, when the interpreter is not there, we still understand each other. We make the best of it.

2. **Given the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences often found between educators and the children and families they serve, how can educators effectively learn about the families and children they serve?**

   Participant responses should include: creative approaches to community outreach and information-gathering options such as: attending religious services in the community that may be in different languages; visiting families at home; shopping in local stores; attending cultural or neighborhood events and festivals; using the local library and reading books or stories written by people from a variety of ethnic, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds; reading research and professional literature concerning diverse learners, etc;

3. **What school policies might actively deter parents from participating in their children's schools?**

   Participant responses should include: entering the school building is difficult and requires long waits and multiple steps; there is no effective, simple way to communicate with teachers or administrators on a regular basis; only one type of communication strategy is available (e.g., written notices); work schedules are not considered in the scheduling of family meetings; conferences are infrequent and very short; family members are expected to listen and not contribute at conferences and meetings; alternative times and more comfortable settings for meetings (e.g., community settings, evening meetings, home visits) are not available; etc.

4. **How might a traditional school-to-home model of communication discourage families from forming meaningful partnerships with educators?**

   Participant responses should include: expectations for family members: i.e., that families are not expected or encouraged to contribute such things as knowledge about their children's needs and preferences, concerns about school policies, ideas for educational experiences, etc.; families are expected only to receive or respond to information from the school; families of children with disabilities are especially vulnerable to increased stress as a result of multiple demands from school personnel without reciprocal efforts to understand their successes, concerns, and daily needs.
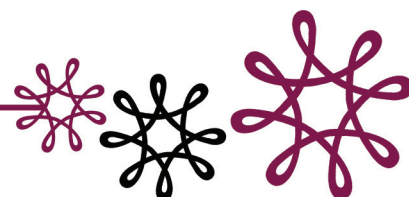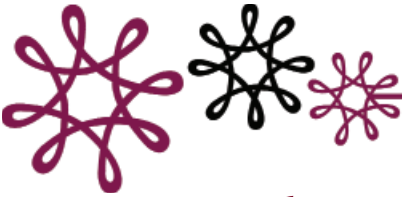
Final Discussion Points

Positive school climate and culture require that families and educators actively work together to promote opportunities for student academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success. Effective partnerships occur when families and schools share responsibility for educating children. This sense of shared responsibility means that there are no prescribed roles for either party, but that families and educators seek realistic and creative opportunities to foster an active partnership.

As you have just heard in this video, most parents identify positive relationships as the most important determinant of a welcoming school climate. Positive relationships require trust, and trust requires ongoing interactions in which both parties strive to learn about each other's goals, values, beliefs, and practices. This leads to learning how to accept one another. One-time events do not provide sufficient opportunity to develop the trust, acceptance, and equitable balance of power that lead to the formation of true collaborative partnerships.

The quality of the relationships between educators and families is the most important determinant of successful partnerships. All interactions focus on identifying strengths, explicitly recognizing families' expertise regarding their own children, and building positive, collaborative solutions that enhance student learning, engagement, and achievement. This approach requires that administrators and educators be proactive, persistent, and creative, seeking positive solutions to all challenges and barriers to effective partnerships with families.

When families are welcomed, they become contributing members of the school community. This partnership creates a "family-friendly" school (Mapp, 2002). Schools should also honor family members by providing respect and affirming and acknowledging any type of contribution or involvement made by families (Mapp, 2002). Finally, there should be a connection with families by placing children at the center of educational issues to improve outcomes for all children (Mapp, 2002).

Suggested Assignment

Write a plan on how you as a teacher or administrator can welcome, honor, and connect with families in your school. This should include families who have disabilities, families who speak various languages, and families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

School Climate and Culture References, Suggested Readings, and Resources

Bryan, J. & Henry, L. (2008). Strengths-Based Partnerships: A School-Family-Community Approach to Empowering Students. *Professional School Counseling*, *12*(2), 149-156.

The Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/publications.htm.

Crosnoe, R. (2009). Family-School Connections and the Transitions of Low-Income Youths and English Language Learners from Middle School to High School. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(4), 1061-1076.

Dessel, A. (2010). Prejudice in Schools: Promotion of an Inclusive Culture and Climate. *Education and Urban Society, 42*(4), 407-429.

Guo, Y. (2009). Communicating with Parents Across Cultures: An Investigation of an ESL Parents' Night. *Journal of Educational Thought, 43*(2), 171-190.

Hill, N. E. & Torres, K. (2010). Negotiating the American Dream: The Paradox of Aspirations and Achievement among Latino Students and Engagement between Their Families and Schools. *Journal of Social Issues*, *66*(1), 95-112.

Mapp, K. & Hong, S. (2010). Debunking the Myth of the Hard-to-Reach Parent. In S. L. Christenson & A.L. Reschly (Eds.). *Handbook of School-Family partnerships.* New York: Routledge. http://cewarchive.miami.edu/587.

Norman, S. J. (2010). The Human Face of School Reform. *National Forum of Educational Administration & Supervision Journal, 21*(4), 1-6.

Stuht, A. C. (2009, November/December). Hitting the streets for home visits [Electronic version]. *Leadership*, *39*(2), 24-26.

Theoharis, G. (2010). Disrupting Injustice: Principals Narrate the Strategies They Use to Improve Their Schools and Advance Social Justice. *Teacher's College Record, 112*(1), 331-373.

The Connecticut Parent Information and Resource Center can also provide information and can be reached at (800) 842-8678 or http://www.ctpirc.org.
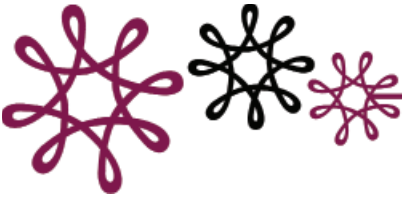
-2-
CULTURE AND FAMILIES

Description

This unit will assist participants in understanding culture as a complex interactive and fluid process, identifying their personal cultural assumptions and practices, recognizing the uniqueness of individual families, and understanding the ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture influence daily interactions.

Participant (Student) Objectives

❏ Demonstrate understanding of culture as a complex, fluid, interactive process.
❏ Articulate personal cultural beliefs, assumptions, and practices.
❏ Explore cultural similarities and differences in interactions with families.

## Suggested Presentation of Concepts for the Facilitator Before Viewing the Video

• Absorbing cultural knowledge and expectations from our families and communities begins at birth and is a universal human process. Because culture is a part of who we are from before our earliest memories, our own cultural beliefs and values are usually unconscious and unexamined. We use these unconscious assumptions to interpret events and experiences in our lives.

> *Example:* Ask the pre-service or beginning educators what they would think about a child who looks at the floor when speaking to the teacher. Many from the dominant American culture will interpret this behavior as an indication that the child is very shy or has low self-esteem. In many other cultures, this behavior is interpreted as an indication that the child is respectful and has been raised well.

• Our shared cultural knowledge is based upon our interactions with others and is continually modified in the context of these interactions. In other words, we continue to absorb cultural knowledge and expectations throughout our lives.

> *Example:* Knowing that lack of eye contact is a sign of respect for some children may change the way that you behave toward children who do not look at you when speaking. Can you give other examples of how new experiences have changed your assumptions and behavior in social situations?

We continue to acquire shared knowledge through our life experiences and social interactions. Beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability are part of this shared, communal knowledge, but are rarely examined and commonly considered taboo topics in many settings. Inclusive cultural exploration uses open-ended questions to examine shared knowledge from the multiple perspectives of others and recognizes that group comparisons are most useful in developing self-awareness. Contrasting the values, beliefs, and practices of significantly different
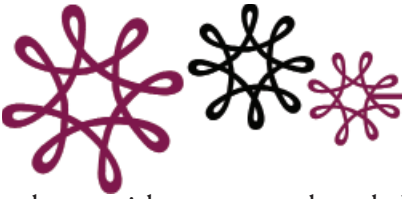
cultures with our own values, beliefs, and practices helps illuminate these assumed, unconscious parts of ourselves. In addition, the uniqueness of individuals is highlighted by the fact that variation within any given group is often greater than the variations between groups. Culturally reciprocal practice requires individual explorations before interventions are implemented. Listed below are some definitions related to culture that can be used to support the concepts presented in this unit.

Definitions:

Collective Culture:
People tend to view themselves as members of groups and usually consider the needs of the group over individual needs.

Culture:
The shared implicit and explicit rules and traditions that express the beliefs, values, and goals of a group of people.

Cultural reciprocity:
Developing cultural reciprocity requires two ongoing processes: Development of self-awareness of one's own cultural, racial, and ethnic assumptions and beliefs; and willingness to explore the assumptions and beliefs of others in the full context of their personal and shared histories, life experiences, goals, and practices.

Cultural Exploration:
Ways in which different groups of people can become aware and have higher understanding of cultures that are different from their own.

Ethnicity:
Group of people who share a culture of origin.

Race:
The concept of race used by the Census Bureau reflects self-identification by people according to the race or races with which they most closely identify. These categories are sociopolitical constructs and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature. Furthermore, the race categories include both racial and national-origin groups.

Stereotypes:
Beliefs or characteristics assigned to groups of people because of their race, ethnicity, culture, gender, or other aspects of their identity.

Show the Culture and Families Unit of the Video (Unit 2)
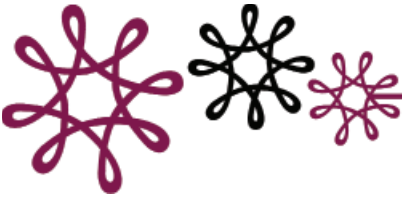
Discussion Questions

1. How would you define culture?

Participant responses should include: elements from the four cultural definitions provided and some examples.

2. Ask participants to share some of the key points they have learned from this video unit.

Participant responses should include the importance of: learning about the uniqueness of each family; basing interactions on genuine caring and respect; "going the extra mile" as a professional to make family connections; honoring differences; avoiding stereotypes; including grandparents and extended family members; communicating in a variety of ways; learning to embrace uncomfortable feelings and seeking understanding through interactions; reflecting on our own values and attitudes; being courageous and open to others; and actively seeking to understand beliefs about family, education, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., that may differ from one's own.

Final Discussion Points

Failure to actively explore the cultural perspectives of others and share your own often leads to failed relationships and ineffective interventions. Failed relationships with families can lead to lower academic achievement for children.

Our institutions and customs reflect our cultural values. The dominant American culture values assertive, outgoing, autonomous individuals; therefore, our institutions promote and reward individual achievement, competition, and self-promotion. Cultures demonstrate the values they hold (respect, attention to others' needs, "considerate" behavior, etc.) in different ways, and their institutions promote and reward accomplishments, humility, collaboration, competition, and level of social engagement in different ways. A multicultural society is culturally responsive and requires flexible, individually responsive institutions and customs.

Suggested Assignment

Attend a cultural event or practice that you are unfamiliar with and observe and take notes. Record in a journal what transpired, what is similar and different to your culture, and what surprised you the most. Be prepared to discuss in class.

Reflect briefly on how this experience might positively affect your ability to work with parents and families in the future.

Culture and Families References, Suggested Readings, and Resources

Auerbach, S. (2004). Engaging Latino parents in supporting college pathways: Lessons from a college access program. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, *3*(2), 125-145.

Allen, J. (2009). Effective home–school communication. Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter, 1(1). Retrieved February 1, 2009, from http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/effective-home-school-communication.

Behnke, A. O. (Fall, 2005). Recommendations for working with Latino parents. North Carolina Parenting Education Network Newsletter, *6*(3), 1-2.

Carlson, V. J. & Harwood, R. L. (2000). Understanding and negotiating cultural differences concerning early developmental competence: The six raisin solution. ZERO TO THREE Bulletin of the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families, *20*(3), 19-24.

Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., Chu, A. & Weiss, H. B. (2011). Teaching the Teachers: Preparing Educators to Engage Families for Student Achievement. (Issues in Teacher Preparation and Professional Development). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Contreras, J. M., Kerns, K. A. & Neal-Barnett, A. M. (Eds.) (2002). *Latino Children and Families in the United States.* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Espinoza-Herold, M. (2003). *Issues in Latino Education: Race, School Culture, and the Politics of Academic Success.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Gardiner, H.W. & Kosmitzki, C. (2002). *Lives across cultures: Cross-cultural human development (2nd ed.).* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Harwood, R.L., Leyendecker, B., Carlson, V.J., Asencio, M., & Miller, A.M. (2002). Parenting among Latino families in the U.S. In M. Bornstein (Ed.). *The Handbook of Parenting (2nd ed.): Vol. 4. Social Conditions and Applied Parenting.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Harvard Family Research Project: http://www.hfrp.org.

Hildebrand, V., Phenice, L., Gray, M., & Hines, R. (2000). *Knowing and serving diverse families (2nd ed.).* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Hudley, E. V. P., Haight, W., & Miller, P. J. (2003). *Raise Up a Child: Human Development in an African-American Family.* Chicago: Lyceum Books.

Jeynes, W. H. (2005). *Parental involvement and student achievement: A meta-analysis* (Family Involvement Research Digest)*.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved November 20, 2012, from http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/publications_resources/publications_series/family_involvement research_digests/parental_involvement_and_student_achievement_a_meta_analysis.

Johnson-Coleman, L. (1998). *Just Plain Folks.* Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Moore, T. Drawing on Parents' Strengths: The Role of Districts and Schools in Empowering Families to Be Effective Partners in Learning. *FINE Newsletter, 3*(2). Peoples, J. & Bailey, G. (2009). *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (8th Edition), Thomson Learning.

Rudy, N. Holding Schools Accountable: Using Data to Engage Parents in School Improvement Efforts. *FINE Newsletter*, *3*(4).

TuSmith, B. & Bergevin, G.W. (2000). *American Family Album.* New York: Harcourt College Publishers.

Weiss, H., Lopez, M. E., & Kreider, H. (2003). Family–school partnerships. Retrieved January 1, 2007 from http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/syllabus/weiss.html.
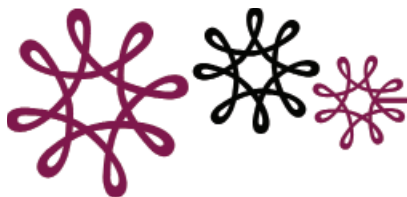
-3-
COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Description

This unit will assist teachers in establishing and sustaining reciprocal, respectful partnerships with diverse families. This process is best facilitated by focusing on family strengths and collaboratively clarifying child and family goals and concerns. Such partnerships support the positive, long-term school/family partnerships that are consistently found to increase student achievement.

Participant (Student) Objectives

❏ Provide examples of strategies to use to identify and build on family and community strengths.

❏ Demonstrate the ability to use positive, reciprocal, respectful communication techniques to learn and to examine daily lives, beliefs, and practices of families and school staff.

❏ Develop strategies for clarifying the concerns and needs of the child and family.

Suggested Presentation of Concepts for the Facilitator Before Viewing the Video

- Establishing relationships with families: Initial contacts with families set the tone for all future interactions. Show respect by including positive statements in your introductions.

    Example: "My name is ___ and I'm delighted to have your son, Erick, in my class this year. Erick has already shown me that he enjoys math and has a great sense of humor. I'm looking forward to sharing Erick's progress with you as we work together this year."

A key to establishing positive relationships is to understand the importance of ethnic differences. The dominant American culture values academic and business success, while many cultural groups believe that adhering to social norms and establishing good manners are equally important. Inclusion of extended family members (e.g., by greeting the oldest person present first and asking how he or she would like to be addressed) is an important consideration often overlooked by many American teachers eager to focus on the child's needs. Asking how family members are doing, listening respectfully to the answer, and responding politely also shows good manners and appropriate concern for others.

- Sustaining reciprocal partnerships: Identify family strengths by complimenting parents on positive aspects of their child's behavior and/or development.

    Example: "Megan is such a respectful child. She always says 'please' and 'thank you' and asks permission when she should. The other children like her very much."
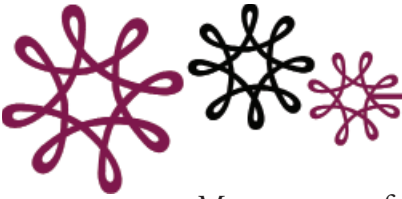
Many parents feel that their primary responsibility is to send to school a child who is clean, well dressed, well behaved, and respectful in interactions with authority figures and peers. Letting them know that you value their parenting efforts sets a mutually appreciative tone for relationship building.

- Identifying family goals: Ask parents directly what they would like their children to achieve during your school year together. Listen carefully, without judgment, to the words and overall message the parent is trying to convey. Check the accuracy of your understanding by restating their goals before stating your own.

    Example: Parent: "I hope that Ashley can learn to get all her work done in school, and do better on those tests so we won't have teachers calling us all the time about how she's not doing well." Teacher: "So you're saying you'd like it if she finished all her work every day, and you also don't like getting phone calls about her not doing well?"

The teacher can now relate her own goals to each of these concerns and perhaps negotiate setting aside some time each night for homework and setting a family contact schedule emphasizing "catching Ashley being good" messages.

    Strategy: Set up a 5-minute family contact schedule by taking your class list and putting one child's name on each school day of each month alphabetically. Let parents know that you will be calling, or sending them a note or email message (their choice) once per month. This will be a brief, positive contact with a sincere hello, asking how the family is doing, and relating one positive example of their child's behavior/achievement for that month. Establish clear boundaries for this as a brief contact in your first conversation. If families need to speak to you in more depth, let them know they will need to schedule another time for that, or that you may need to refer them to another appropriate staff member.

- Positive communication techniques. Communication with families that is based on mutual affection for and dedication to the success of their children will lead to trusting and respectful relationships. Parents who know that you care about them and their children will trust you and work with you to maximize their children's success.

    Strategy: Three effective techniques and examples for fostering mutually respectful dialogue are as follows:
    1. Mirroring: "I understand, you're saying"
    2. Thoughtful and caring validation: "I imagine you're feeling"
    3. Clarification: "Can you say more about?" or "Did I get that?"

Using these simple statements demonstrate that you are listening deeply and with compassion, and are committed to understanding the speaker's point of view. Even very difficult interactions with emotionally charged or angry speakers can become productive if you remain calm and are willing to continually mirror what you hear the other person saying, validate their emotions, and ask for clarification in your interpretation of their message.
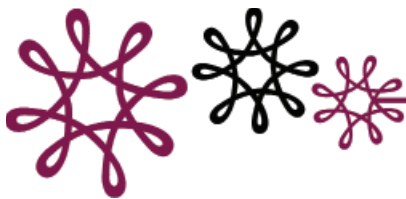
Mutual respect and reciprocity are also fostered by a willingness to directly address potential sources of conflict, e.g., by pointing out that your job requires you to meet the needs of your whole class, but that you understand that the family is naturally focused on the needs of its individual child. Another important point that professionals often overlook is the relative value given to written vs. oral communication among diverse cultural groups. Parents who do not respond to written communication may not just face language and literacy barriers; they may simply not accept written communication as important, especially if you have not met them in person. It is important to note that many family members who have immigrated may not be literate even in their native language, so written translation is not a universally effective strategy. Judging the commitment of a family to their children's success based on their responses to written communication strategies alone is often unfair and may prevent the development of effective partnerships with families of the children most in need of support. Be sure to try multiple means of communication, ideally including notes, phone, e-mail if available, and home visits. A reliable, non-family member for translation assistance is also a very important liaison. Do your best to learn to say at least "Hello" and "Goodbye" in each family's native language before meeting the family for the first time.

Show the Communication/Relationship Building Unit of the Video (Unit 3)

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the key points learned in this video unit?

Participant responses should include the importance of: nonverbal cues and the emotional tone of conversations; facilitation of English language learning in all aspects of daily school interactions; willingness to learn about families and be involved in the community; positive communication about children; offering multiple avenues of communication; avoiding the use of family members as translators; building trust based on open communication and mutual respect; thoughtful and courageous evaluation of prejudices and assumptions based on socioeconomic class; and an unwavering belief that all families care about their children.

2. Ask participants to briefly brainstorm comments that they might use to mirror, validate, or show appreciation for the family members who spoke during this video segment.

Participant responses should include: use of varied language that is not repetitive or condescending and that promotes the flow of the conversation
(e.g., "it sounds like . . .; it's important to you that. . .; you need others to understand that. . . ; I can tell that this means a great deal to you; oh, you must be so proud; that sounds like it must have been a very painful experience," etc.)

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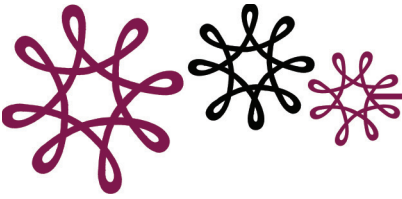
Translation of grandmother's comments on video:

Talking to the teacher is good progress, because we can talk about the problems with the child and how I can offer solutions. The teacher [speaks] English and there's [an] interpreter, but when there is not an interpreter I try my best to communicate.

Final Discussion Points

Families who feel valued, understood, and appreciated are far more likely to communicate with and feel connected to their children's schools. Teachers who believe that all families have strengths and want their children to succeed will find it possible to establish truly reciprocal partnerships with families by actively seeking to know their students' families and communities, practicing effective communication techniques, and maintaining a consistent positive communication schedule based on family preferences for written vs. oral modalities.

Suggested Assignment

The assignment for this unit requires that each student/participant complete a conversation with a family. (See next page for Unit Assignment Guiding Questions.)

Encourage students to visit diverse families, including families from differing socioeconomic levels and racial and ethnic backgrounds. A campus laboratory preschool, local family resource centers, religious groups, or community agencies may provide access to diverse families if students require assistance. (See Assignment Grading Rubric on last page of this unit)

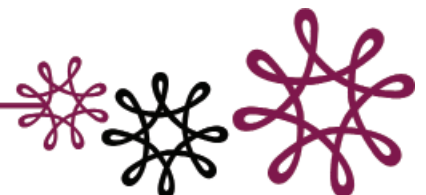## Communication and Relationship Building Unit Assignment: Guiding Questions

Find a family with a child, preferably one that is culturally, linguistically different than yourself, and who has attended public school for at least three years. Explain that you are learning about communication and building relationships with the families of children in your classroom, and ask if the parent(s) or guardian(s) would be willing to talk with you about their experiences with their child's school. Tell them that this is an assignment designed to assist you in becoming a better teacher. Assure them that you will maintain complete confidentiality and will not identify the family or student in any way in the completion of this assignment. Arrange a time to visit and spend about 20 to 30 minutes in conversation.

Begin the conversation by thanking the person(s) for agreeing to meet with you and facilitate introductions of all present and re-state the purpose of the conversation. Ask the parent(s) or guardian(s) to describe their most positive experience with their child's school. Use the strategies presented in this unit to make sure you understand their point of view and reasons for finding this event so gratifying. Then ask the parent(s) or guardian(s) to describe their most challenging experience with their child's school. Use the strategies presented in this unit to make sure you understand their point of view and reasons for finding this event so upsetting. If they cannot think of such an experience with their child's school, ask them if they can describe one from their own public school experience and describe how it affected their family. After the visit, briefly describe your conversation as follows:

1. I introduced myself and greeted those present by establishing a respectful tone and clarified the purpose of this conversation by:

2. I used mirroring to let the parent(s) know that I was listening deeply when I said: (give 3 examples)

3. I showed understanding and validated the feelings the family member(s) expressed when I said: (give 3 examples)

4. I asked for clarification before adding any comments of my own when I said: (give 3 examples)

5. I expressed appreciation for the family's efforts and respect for the family when I said: (give 3 examples)

6. Three things that I would change/improve if I conducted this conversation again are:

# Communication and Relationship Building Unit Assignment Rubric

Task	Unacceptable (1-2 points)	Acceptable (3 points)	Target (4-5 points)
Introduction	Gives simple statement of exchange of names	Mentions basic introduction and clear statement of the purpose of conversation	Introduces self, facilitates introductions of all present to build reciprocity between all parties present, compliments parent(s) on a strength of child/children, gives purpose and expresses appreciation
Mirroring	3 separate examples not provided or the examples demonstrate or reinforce power differential between interviewer and interviewee(s)	3 examples of simple mirror statements provided, all using same wording (so you're saying that…)	3 examples given that vary in form and promote the natural flow of conversation
Validation	3 separate examples not provided	3 examples of simple validation statements provided, all using same wording (so you're feeling…)	3 examples given that vary in form, express sincere compassion, and promote the natural flow of conversation
Clarification	3 separate examples not provided	3 examples of simple clarification statements provided, all using same wording (Is that right?)	3 examples given that vary in form and promote the natural flow of conversation
Appreciation	3 separate examples not provided	3 examples of simple appreciation statements provided, all using similar wording	3 examples given that vary in form, express sincere appreciation for the parents' point of view, and promote the natural flow of conversation
Reflection	Makes only concrete statement(s) about actual event (talking to parent in different location, etc.)	Relates experiences to concepts in the unit to suggest improvements	Uses concepts from unit to explain improvements that would increase effectiveness in building long-term family partnerships

Communication and Relationship Building References, Suggested Readings, and Resources

Abdul-Adil, J., & Farmer, A. (2006). Inner-city African American parental involvement in elementary schools: Getting beyond urban legends of apathy. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *21*(1), 1-12.

Christenson, S., Palan, R., & Cullin, S. (2009). Family-School Partnerships: An Essential Component of Student Achievement. *Principal Leadership: High School Edition*, *9*(9), 10-16. Retrieved from Education Research Complete database.

Connecticut Parent Information and Resource Center, (800) 842-8678, http://www.ctpirc.org.

Cox, D. (2005). Evidence-based interventions using home-school collaboration. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *20*(4), 473-497.

Ditrano, C., & Silverstein, L. (2006). Listening to parents' voices: Participatory action research in the schools. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *37*(4), 359-366.

Kivel, P. (2004). The Culture of Power. *Conflict Management in Higher Education Report*, 5.1.

Mortier, K., Hunt, P., Leroy, M., van de Putte, I., & van Hove, G. (2010). Communities of practice in inclusive education. *Educational Studies*, *36*(3), 345-355.

Ratcliff, N., & Hunt, G. (2009). Building Teacher-Family Partnerships: The Role of Teacher Preparation Programs. *Education*, *129*(3), 495-505. Retrieved from Education Research Complete database.
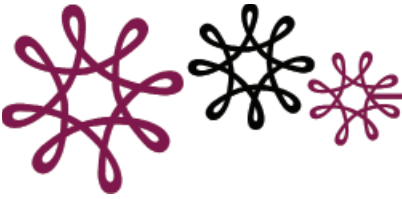
-4-
FAMILY SYSTEMS AND PARENTING

Description

This unit will highlight family systems theory as a framework for understanding contemporary families in the context of their daily lives. Strategies will focus on emphasizing strengths and empowering families as they undertake the roles common among families today. Teachers who understand family development recognize families as a fund of knowledge and are able to support and empower parents to facilitate positive school/family partnerships that lead to increased student achievement.

Participant (Student) Objectives

❏ Gain insight into the nature of families.
❏ Demonstrate understanding of the basic concepts used in family systems theory, including the ways in which families negotiate issues of cohesion, communication, and adaptation.
❏ Give examples based on family observations of the ways in which families function effectively and cope with unexpected life events.
❏ Identify family strengths and describe strengths-based partnership strategies.

Suggested Presentation of Concepts for the Facilitator Before Viewing the Video

Family systems theory defines a family as an interactive, interdependent whole. A family is more than the sum of its members. Perhaps the best analogy is a cake: the ingredients mix together to form a semisolid substance that does not resemble any one of the ingredients, and, when subjected to an outside force in the form of oven heat, the mixture becomes something entirely new and different. Thus, knowing and working with individual family members in isolation do not provide realistic information about the family as a whole or the relationships and interactions that shape the daily lives of family members.

Family interactions and relationships are reciprocal, patterned, and repetitive. A patterned "big brother" – "baby sister" sibling relationship based on teasing is likely to continue, even when both siblings have been separated for years and have become grandparents. Family roles involve shared patterns of interactions that may be positive and comforting, or negative and alienating. These relationship patterns become habitual among family members, tend to occur during a lifespan, and are resistant to change. We know that early relationship experiences can build a strong foundation for development or a fragile one, and can affect the way children react and respond to the world around them for the rest of their lives. Thus, supporting families in maintaining warm and responsive relationships with their children will increase the number of children who come to school with the social-emotional foundation for academic success.

Cohesiveness refers to the levels of emotional closeness, harmony, conflict, and interpersonal tensions experienced within the family. Some families maintain very close emotional relationships over the years; other families maintain harmonious relationships with high expectations for individuality and independence; still others are highly conflictual, with little warmth and no real sense of commitment to the family as a system. To return to our cake, the proportions of ingredients may be changed to result in a softer, chewier, more cohesive cake; a lighter, fluffier, more airy cake; or a hard, inedible cake. Emotional closeness, harmony, conflicts, and interpersonal tensions are mixed together in every family. The balance and proportions of these ingredients determine the nature and experience of family cohesiveness.
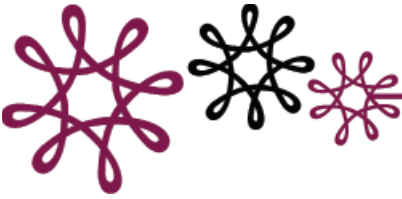
Adaptability refers to the ability of the family as a whole to adapt to changes. Whole families are changed by events that affect an individual member or the entire family. Some families may be pulled apart by traumatic events such as a death in the family; others may respond to trauma by becoming closer and more dependent on one another. To return to the cake analogy, changing the oven temperature requires adaptation in order to preserve the cake. Adapting to a higher temperature may be possible if the time in the oven is reduced; a lower temperature may require longer baking time. In either case, the results are likely to be less than ideal, but it is possible to produce an edible cake with patience and care. Families who have emotional reserves and positive relationships are more likely to survive significant changes intact.

Communication refers to the ability of family members to express their thoughts and emotions to one another verbally and non-verbally. Conflicts and interpersonal tensions are inescapable components of family life. Communication styles vary greatly among families, but the ability to resolve conflicts in a manner that does not demean or victimize any family member is key to healthy family functioning. If one ingredient of our cake is not included, or the ingredients are divided into groups that are not combined into the final mixture, the result will not be edible. Positive family communication must result in an overall pattern of inclusion of and respect for the needs of all members in order to support the development of healthy, competent individuals.

Life cycle changes are expected events in the life of a family. The birth of children, death of grandparents, development of children from infancy through adolescence and adulthood, and the resulting changes in parenting roles and responsibilities are all expected life cycle changes that require changes in family strategies for maintaining balanced levels of cohesion, adaptability, and communication. Sometimes responding to change throughout the life cycle is based on several interrelated factors: level of access to information, options related to certain life paths and outcomes, level of access to and possession of resources, likelihood of positive/negative outcome, etc. These factors working together form what may be categorized as social capital, which can be distributed to families based on their culture (e.g., racial makeup of the family unit, their proportion of wealth/assets/debt, ethnic ties, etc.), and how access to social capital may impact one's ability to adapt.

Adaptations to unexpected events are more difficult for families and result in greater disruptions to family functioning. Unexpected events include family members experiencing permanent disability or chronic illness, untimely death of a family member, divorce, long-term unemployment, poverty or homelessness, and more. These events require extreme adaptations and changes in family strategies and roles related to cohesion and communication. Discovering that one ingredient is not available just

before the cake is ready to bake may make it impossible to complete the cake; in other situations, it may be possible to borrow the missing ingredient from a neighbor or an extended family member; others may have the resources to run to the store to buy the ingredient; some may simply give up and decide they can live without a cake. Likewise, some families may have the social support networks, resources, and determination to overcome unexpected events, while others may simply be overwhelmed and be unable to continue functioning as a cohesive family unit.

Show the Family Systems and Parenting Unit of the Video (Unit 4)

Discussion Question

What are some of the key points learned in this video unit?

> *Participant responses should include the importance of:* seeking to understand family stories; believing that all families want their children to do better than the parents have; understanding that families look for teachers to have the "heart" and positive attitude to form caring partnerships with children and families; a belief that difference is not deficit; an understanding that all families have strengths; an understanding that family structures and parenting styles vary widely; and a belief that professionals need to embrace and accept families in order to serve children well.
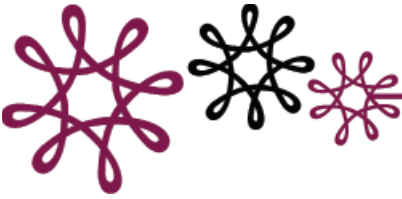
Final Discussion Points

Changes in one member cause changes in other family members and in the family group as a whole.

The system as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts; i.e., the whole includes the relationships among the parts. A family system that becomes connected to an educational system through a network of positive relationships is a significantly more powerful socializing agent than each system operating separately or individual members of the system operating independently.

Systems are complex entities, and similar outcomes may result from very different antecedents. There is always more than one way for systems to reach a goal. For example, standard instructions for homework support may produce the desired outcomes for some families, but not for others.

Children learn and develop in the context of their family, and that system forms a positive reciprocal relationship with the educational system in order for children's learning and achievement to be optimal. Thus, family partnerships are essential to student achievement, not an "extra" program to be attended to when staffing and budgets permit.

Suggested Assignment

The assignment for this unit asks that each student/participant write a reflection paper after a conversation with a staff member from a resource center for families of children with disabilities. A list of Connecticut resources for families can be found at www.sde.ct.gov.

Questions to ask a staff member from the resource centers:
What services do you provide?

How do you help families?

What lessons have you learned about schools and families that can help teachers create meaningful partnerships with families?

Family Systems References, Suggested Readings, and Resources

Burke, R. (2010). Pre-service Teacher Education about Drug or Alcohol-Impaired Dysfunctional Families. *National Forum of Special Education Journal*, *21*(1), 1-11. Retrieved from Education Research Complete database.

Connecticut Parent Information and Resource Center, (800) 842-8678, http://www.ctpirc.org.

Day, R. D. (2010). *Introduction to Family Processes* (5th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Eppler, C., & Weir, S. (2009). Family assessment in K-12 settings: Understanding family systems to provide effective, collaborative services. *Psychology in the Schools*, *46*(6), 501-514. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.

Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V. & Davies, D. Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family/school partnerships. New York: The New Press.

Johnson, V. (2010). From Early Childhood to Adolescence: Linking Family Functioning and School Behavior. *Family Relations*, *59*(3), 313-325.

Knestrict, T., & Kuchey, D. (2009). Welcome to Holland: Characteristics of resilient families raising children with severe disabilities. *Journal of Family Studies*, *15*(3), 227-244. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.

Kratochwill, T., McDonald, L., Levin, J., Scalia, P., & Coover, G. (2009). Families and schools together: An experimental study of multi-family support groups for children at risk. *Journal of School Psychology*, *47*(4), 245-265.

Connecticut and National School/Family Partnership Statements

CT State Board of Education Position Statements:
http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2683&q=320314

School-Family-Community Partnerships: "An effective program of school-family-community partnerships is a critical support students require to realize their potential, and one essential step toward eliminating our state's achievement gaps."

*Early Childhood Education: "*Families are essential partners in the education of young children and should be involved in early childhood programs in meaningful and culturally relevant ways."

Education of Students Who Are English Language Learners: "Strong partnerships with parents, community organizations, businesses, and universities that respect and celebrate cultural and language differences can provide additional support for these students."

Education of Students with Exceptionalities: "Involve parents of students with disabilities in planning and assessing all aspects of the student's educational program; develop a collaborative approach to service delivery that includes parental involvement, use of community-based resources, and learning experiences that are school-based and community-based ..."

Equal Educational Opportunity: "to encourage parental and community involvement in all public schools of the state" (State Board of Education statutory goal)

Infants, Toddlers and Their Families: "Programs and services must recognize the critical role that families play in the lives of children."

Principles Underlying Education PreK – 12: "Schools must engage families and community members to be active and committed partners in the education of all children."

Connecticut State Department of Education Common Core of Teaching: Foundational Skills:
http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/educatorstandards/board_approved_cct_2-3-2010.pdf

"Proactively communicating in culturally respectful and sensitive ways with families ..."

Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators: "Responsibility to the student's family: Respect the dignity of each family, its culture, customs, and beliefs; Promote, respond, and maintain appropriate communications with the family ...; Consider the family's concerns and perspectives on issues involving its children; and Encourage participation of the family in the educational process"

National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), http://www.ncate.org

"NCATE expects that a professional education unit's conceptual framework include a commitment to preparing candidates to support learning for all students. Standard 4: Diversity ... includes the expectation that candidates have the opportunity to interact with candidates, faculty, and P-12 students from diverse groups."

National Association for the Education of Young Children Standards Position Statement July 2009: "These core standards can provide a solid, commonly held foundation of unifying themes from which diverse programs may arise, incorporating the wisdom of local communities, families, and practitioners. These unifying themes include: Shared professional values, including a commitment to diversity and inclusion; respect for family, community, and cultural contexts …

Association for Childhood Education International Elementary Education Standards 2007: "Candidates know the importance of establishing and maintaining a positive collaborative relationship with families, school colleagues, and agencies in the larger community …"

National Middle School Association Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards 2001: "Middle-level teacher candidates understand the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to working collaboratively with family and community members, and they use that knowledge to maximize the learning of all young adolescents."

NCATE/Council for Exceptional Children Program Standards 2002: "Special educators routinely and effectively collaborate with families, other educators, related services providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways."