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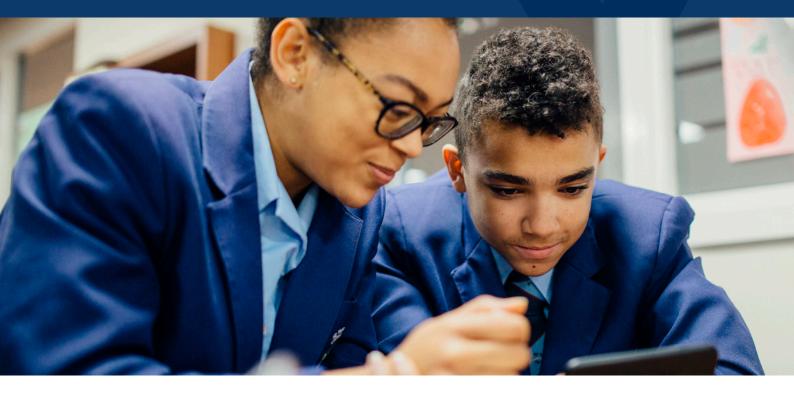
Engaging with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

to support learning in primary and secondary schools

There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's learning. This resource details strategies for engaging families from culturally diverse backgrounds, families with English as an additional language, and families from refugee backgrounds, elaborating on the 'promising approaches' outlined in AERO's family engagement for learning practice guides.

The promising approaches outlined in AERO's family engagement for learning practice guides include:

- recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home
- supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning
- promoting a literacy-rich environment at home (primary school guide)
- collaboratively planning and problem solving with families.

APST: Focus Areas 3.7 and 7.3
APSP: Professional Practice 5 – Engaging and working with the community

Context

Although each family's story and background are unique, this resource offers starting points for teachers and school leaders on how to ensure family engagement for learning through full access and participation for all families.

Before accessing this resource, take time to reflect on your own cultural and linguistic identity:

- As part of our own culture, environment or upbringing, we may hold certain unconscious biases or assumptions that influence the way we approach other individuals or groups.

- While biases may not always be negative, we do need to acknowledge and be aware of their existence and consider the potential impact these can have on others.

- When working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families, try to ensure you are not inadvertently applying any personal biases and assumptions that might influence how you engage.

- Sometimes it may be hard to identify these by yourself, so it can be worth discussing your experiences with your co-workers.

- You may consider participating in cultural competency training either individually or as part of your team to learn more about, reflect on and embrace diversity, and promote inclusion in school settings.

For the purposes of this resource and all AERO family engagement resources, 'families' includes biological parents, legal guardians, adoptive parents, kin carers and out-of-home (foster) carers.

There are many different kinds of CaLD families, including those:

- from culturally diverse backgrounds
- with English as an additional language or dialect
- from refugee backgrounds.

APST: Focus Areas 3.7 and 7.3
APSP: Professional Practice 5 – Engaging and working with the community

Families from culturally diverse backgrounds

Families enter schools with a range of cultural norms, expectations and experiences. Questions to consider when engaging with families from culturally diverse backgrounds may include:

Family roles and responsibilities
- Which family member is the primary connection between the school and home environment?
- What are the roles and responsibilities within the family?
- How might gendered or age-based norms and expectations influence the nature of relationships between family members and school staff?

Cultural expectations around education and educational institutions
- How has the family previously engaged with education services?
- What norms, roles and expectations stem from this past engagement?
- How might this frame the family's current engagement with their child's education?
- Are Australian educational norms, such as play as a valued form of education, the same in the family's culture?

Social and cultural values and norms
- How might social and cultural values and norms influence family members' openness towards sharing details about the child's home environment?
- What are the family's social and cultural values and norms around child-rearing practices?
- What level of engagement do parents or carers traditionally have in their child's learning?
- How do parents/carers prefer to discuss and deal with conflict and/or challenging behaviours related to their child?

Families with English as an additional language or dialect

Children from linguistically diverse backgrounds may have parents/carers who do not speak English fluently or speak an English dialect different to that spoken at the school. Family members may also have limited education in their home language. As a result of this, parents/carers might be reluctant to engage in some experiences, for example, talking with their child about what they have learned, or reading a book together at home.

Families from refugee backgrounds

Families from refugee backgrounds have been displaced from their country of origin due to conflict, oppression or other factors. The conditions endured before relocation to Australia may have been unstable and traumatic. The process of leaving a country of origin and seeking refugee status may also have been rushed, risky or dangerous for a family. As a result, children's access and quality of education in their home country, or while in transition may have been limited and interrupted. Further, displaced families may be at higher risk of having complex family structures, roles and relationships. Research suggests that children from families with refugee backgrounds may particularly benefit from trauma-informed strengths-based approaches coordinated at the school level (Craig 2016; WHGNE 2012).

For information on support that may be available to you,

✓ Promising approaches

Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Families who feel they are working in partnership with their child's school are more likely to engage in practices to support learning at home.

The following are some considerations and strategies around recognising and supporting CaLD families with learning at home.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Remember that CaLD parents/carers may have different understandings around the role of the family in supporting learning at home than your school, as their own backgrounds and experience may differ. Consider how you might have a conversation with parents/carers to establish a common understanding about what's expected.

- Foster a sense of partnership between the school and the family, as this makes families more likely to engage in practices that support learning at home (Smith et al. 2020).

- We don't recommend you simply tell families techniques or tools they should use at home, or ask families to assist with homework, as the research evidence says this isn't an effective approach.

- Instead, determine what strategies families already use to support their child's learning. Some targeted guidance may be beneficial to families around their involvement in their child's learning, such as providing parents with regular updates about what is happening in their child's classes to help them talk with their child about school and what they have learnt.

- Actively seek to understand the learning environment and activities that go on at home within students' cultural and linguistic settings, and collaboratively plan and problem solve with families to find ways to enhance learning through coordinated support.

Reflection questions

- How do families you work with already support their children's learning and development?

- How could you collaboratively plan and problem solve with families to further enhance children's learning and development?

✓ Promising approaches

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Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Work alongside staff to ensure that engagement is a partnership, rather than just parents/carers attending school events.

- Clarify your school's stance on the role of the family in supporting children's learning. This will aid staff in engaging with families more effectively. This is especially important for communicating expectations to families who may have less familiarity with the Australian education system.

Reflection questions

- There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way to recognise and support family engagement in learning at home. What does it look like in your school?

- How does your school cater to the range of different cultural backgrounds of the community when discussing children's learning?

✓ Promising approaches

Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning

Effective two-way communication draws on the knowledge and expertise of both families and teachers about children's learning. Light touch updates to families about student learning improves students' academic achievement, particularly for students at risk of falling behind.

The following are some considerations and strategies around supporting two-way positive communications and providing light touch updates about learning to CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Engage with families in a culturally respectful manner to help nurture trusting relationships and encourage two-way communication. Making time to understand the cultural background of a family is an important first step in conveying cultural respect. This cultural knowledge is important for developing a relationship of trust between yourself and a family, but also how this knowledge (or lack of) influences a family's interactions with service staff, as well as education more broadly. For example, understanding sociocultural norms such as the presence or absence of eye contact during respectful conversations can support positive engagement with families.

- Use inclusive language. Terms such as 'family' and 'parent/carer' as opposed to just 'parent' help to capture a range of family dynamics.

- Ensure that names are pronounced correctly.

- For linguistically diverse families, light touch communication via technology allows families to access information in their home language as needed, using translation apps and default language settings on their devices. However, not every family may prefer or be confident with the use of technology as a communication tool, so hard copy correspondence such as personalised newsletters or visual diaries should also be considered.

Reflection questions

- How do you invite and encourage CaLD families to talk about their child's learning?

- How could you personalise light touch updates, keeping them positive, accessible and to the point?

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Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Consider how you make space in your school for teachers to invite and encourage CaLD families to take part in conversations about learning.

- Ask about and accommodate family members' preferences for how to connect about their child's learning (for example, video conferencing, phone, email or in-person). This information could be gathered centrally and recorded at a school level, ensuring consistency and reducing individual teacher workload.

- Some CaLD families may feel more culturally safe when engaging with school staff through remote methods and/or with the support of family friends whose children also attend the school. This feeling of cultural safety can encourage the development of trusting relationships with school staff.

- Consider accessibility opportunities in all forms of communication, for example, documents such as information sheets or policies could be made available in a range of languages where possible.

- Visuals can assist with access, such as colour-coding forms depending on topic and providing staff photographs in communications.

- Consider the need for translator services, normalising this practice as needed for verbal or written communication. This may also include connecting families to community groups or services that speak their primary language or are from their cultural background. Engaging bilingual teachers or support staff may also be an option if they are available in your school or wider network.

Reflection questions

- How do your school communications cater to differing levels of adult literacy, including families who speak language(s) other than English at home?

- Has your school consulted with families about how they'd like to be communicated with?

✓ Promising approaches

Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home (Primary school students)

A literacy-rich environment is where language in various forms (like talking, listening, reading, storytelling and visual arts) is part of daily life. This type of environment allows children to practice their literacy skills often, in functional ways. One specific way schools can support a literacy-rich environment at home is by promoting shared reading.

The following are some considerations and strategies for promoting a literacy-rich environment at home for CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Support families from linguistically diverse backgrounds to promote a literacy-rich environment at home for their child in their home language when they choose to do so.

- Exposure to literacy in one's home language does not have a negative impact on their capacity to learn English as a second language (Ríos and Castillón 2018; Poulin-Dubois et al. 2011), and if a child has a strong foundation in their home language, they will learn a second language more effectively (Ríos and Castillón 2018; Collier and Thomas 2007; Thomas and Collier 2003; Blom et al. 2014; Center for Applied Linguistics n.d.).

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Just because someone doesn't have proficiency in English, it doesn't mean they have low levels of literacy. They may just be better at conveying their literacy in a language other than English. As such, ensure the most appropriate literacy-rich environments for each child that can be accessed regardless of their level of English proficiency.

- School leaders with experience building literacy across a range of ages and literacy levels are well-positioned to support teachers with fostering literacy-rich environments at home and in classrooms. For example, school leaders can shape the range of texts available in each year group's curriculum planning. This can help ensure that texts are developmentally appropriate, accessible to all children and also present a challenge at a level suitable for each child. Providing engaging and accessible texts as part of school curriculum supports families with encouraging reading at home.

Reflection questions

- How can you support and encourage families to incorporate their own linguistic and cultural norms (for example, songs and storytelling) into literacy learning at home?

- What might a 'literacy-rich environment' at home look like for your students? Do you promote it as an extension of families' cultural beliefs/values and linguistic experiences?

Reflection questions

- How might aspects of 'literacy-rich environments' change for students across different learning and developmental milestones – for example, across year groups, or as students become more fluent in English as a second language?

- Do staff at your school know of the positive effects of bilingual literacy and how this can be promoted?

- How do teachers ensure that students have access to appropriate levels of academic challenge, despite possibly having low levels of English literacy?

✓ Promising approaches

Collaboratively planning and problem solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem solving between families, students and school staff has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes. Collaborative planning could involve working together with families and students to identify students' individual goals (for example, around developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly from primary to secondary school), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.

The following are some considerations and strategies around collaboratively planning and problem solving with CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Problem solve with families, collectively agreeing how responsibility for decision-making and learning is shared.

- Facilitate honest but culturally safe conversations around children's goals, needs, strengths and challenges in culturally safe environments. For example, a family may not present a critical question directly, as it is not culturally appropriate for them to do so. In this instance, allowing an opportunity to debrief via email may be a suitable accommodation that provides space for questions and concerns to be raised. In other instances, having face-to-face conversations with cultural support in attendance may be more conducive to a successful discussion.

- Use discussions to identify children's interests, current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and needs. This information can inform the child's goals, as well as any potential avenues to achieve these goals.

Reflection questions

- What types of goals are your students working towards? Do you invite or encourage families to help shape some of these goals?

- How do you collaborate with families to help ensure students can achieve their goals and identify any barriers along the way?

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The following are some considerations and strategies around collaboratively planning and problem solving with CaLD families.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Schools should ensure a consistent and agreed-upon approach between families, teachers and leaders for addressing a student's learning needs. School leaders have a role in ensuring that effective and promising approaches are adopted appropriately while also meeting the specific needs of each family and child.

- Communicate clearly and consistently, while keeping information relevant for families. This will help to foster confidence that the school is a place of support.

- Build a culture in which families feel safe raising issues or challenges with staff about their child's learning.

- Consider how your school uses practices that promote cultural safety, as this will maximise chances of ongoing collaborative meetings.

- Support staff to follow up on student goals in a timely fashion, making space for collaborative meetings to happen where possible.

- School leaders can help teachers involve other support staff and agencies in the collaboration and goal-setting process for each child. These supports may include education assistants, cultural supports, translators and health professionals such as psychologists.

Reflection questions

- How easy is it for families to raise issues or challenges about learning with school staff? Do you consider cultural factors when making space for issues or challenges to be raised?

- Are there systems in place to allow for collaborative problem solving with families on a consistent basis?

References

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Available supports

Support services exist to support family engagement between you and families from CaLD backgrounds. These services will vary based on your location, but it is important to investigate and be aware of what resources you are able to draw on. Some examples might include:

- migrant resource services, bicultural support services and services available through local councils
- interpreting and translating services, including teachers within your school who can assist
- trauma support services.

If there are teachers within your school who can assist with interpreting and translating, consider whether they are also able to help families to build social connections through their own networks.

More information

The AERO website features further guidance, including practice guides, case studies, implementation checklists and promising approaches audit tools:

- Family engagement in schools
- Family engagement in ECEC