Chapter 4
Structurally Diverse Families
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C-TEN
Ethical Family Involvement

• Rather than labeling families in your mind as “single-parent,” “blended,” “same-sex,” and so on, you would do your students and their families the best service by getting to know each family as individuals. Family structure provides an important backdrop in understanding how a family operates, but it is only the beginning when it comes to developing relationships. True partnerships will begin when you develop deeper understandings of who each family is as an individual family.
Suggestions for Working With Nuclear Families

- Plan activities for both fathers and mothers to be engaged in their child’s education. Don’t just ask for “room mother” volunteers but also offer volunteer opportunities for fathers.

- Let stay-at-home parents indicate their interests, as opposed to dictating volunteer opportunities. While stay-at-home parents are often interested and willing to volunteer in their children’s classrooms, it is important to not take advantage of them or assume that they will always handle family volunteer duties.

- Arrange for parent-teacher conferences and school events after work hours for dual-working families. Schedule events at various times to accommodate different working schedules, such as a breakfast with the teachers, a Saturday morning brunch, or weeknight conference appointments.
Suggestions for Working With Nuclear Families

- Arrange networking opportunities for families to get to know one another, such as parent education meetings, family nights, celebrations, and other activities. For families who may not have extended families nearby for support, help them develop supportive relationships with other families.

- Be aware of children who may be latchkey children because of both parents working. Help organize an afterschool program in your district to meet the needs of working parents.

- Although you may not agree with the living arrangement of a parent(s) cohabiting, it is important to treat all families with respect, such as using the correct last name for each parent. Avoid addressing letters home to “Mr. and Mrs. ____.”
Suggestions for Working With Extended Families (con’t)

• Send out a survey at the beginning of the school year to find who all the members of the students’ families are, their roles in the children’s lives, and their expected involvement in the children’s education.

• Allow children to include extended family members in any activity or assignment that involves families, such as drawing pictures of their families, writing stories about them, or making multiple gifts for family members at Christmas.

• Include extended family members in any invitations for school events and do not limit the number of family members students can bring to school activities.

• Be sure to have enough chairs and space for extended family members when meeting with them for a conference.
Suggestions for Working With Single-Parent Families

- Have conferences at times that are convenient for working single parents and offer child care.

- Encourage single parents to be involved in ways that are easy for them, such as take-home activities, rather than coming to school. Send home videos taken during the school day and class books with pictures of school events so parents know what’s happening in the classroom.

- Don’t assume that single parents don’t care about their child’s education if they don’t volunteer or get involved at school. Families that live in poverty may be dealing with survival needs that are more pressing, such as keeping the heat turned on or getting a car running, and although they may want to support their child’s education, basic needs have to come first.
Suggestions for Working with Single Parent Families (con’t)

• Offer extra support for children, such as after-school tutoring, child care, or homework help.

• Give single parents support by helping them form relationships with other families in the classroom for sick child care, carpoools, friendships, and advice.

• Be sensitive to single parents’ financial needs by not sending home frequent requests for money or supplies.

• Share children’s literature that includes the single-parent family type.
Suggestions for Working With Families Experiencing a Divorce

- Help organize support groups for children led by your school counselor during the school day and family support meetings at night. Meeting topics can focus on problem solving, coping, and communication skills. Make sure your programs are based on the specific needs of the children, as related to their age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Richardson & Rosen, 1999).

- Remain in communication with the noncustodial parent as much as possible. One way to do this is to communicate regularly with both parents by sending copies of newsletters and notes to both the custodial and noncustodial parent and, if necessary, holding separate conferences for estranged parents. Do not rely on young children to remember to show any newsletters or note to both parents.
Suggestions for Working With Families Experiencing Divorce

• Be aware of any court order relating to visitation and custody, as well as whether a legal parenting plan exists. Document the visitation/custody schedule of your students and become familiar with what days children are with each parent. Help parents understand your school schedule, such as the day library books are due or children need to be dressed for a PE class.

• Although your role as the classroom teacher is not to be a counselor, you can provide parents a chance to share their emotions, including their fears about the future and the consequences of the divorce on their children.

• Maintain a classroom with security and structure and allow children to express their feelings in a variety of ways, such as artwork, puppets, and personal conversations.
Suggestions for Working With Blended Families

- Offer support for children by facilitating peer relationships and support groups. Be especially sensitive to children’s needs if a parent has recently remarried, especially if the remarriage required the child to move and change schools.

- If making family gifts or pictures, let children draw more than one picture or make gifts appropriate for their situation, such as two Mother’s Day cards.

- Be aware of family names and use the correct last name for students, parents, and stepparents.

- Include the noncustodial parent in communication and school activities.
Suggestions for Working With Blended Families

- Be aware of a student’s schedule for visitation with another parent, in homework assignments, library books, notes, and permission slips. When talking about visitation experiences, present it in a positive light, such as having two homes.

- Avoid using terms such as, “your mom’s house” or “your dad’s house,” which imply that neither home is the child’s, and instead, use terminology such as, “your home with your mom” and “your home with your dad.”
Suggestions for Working With Kinship Care Families

- Acknowledge grandparents or other relatives as primary caregivers by initiating contact and maintaining that contact throughout the school year. Issues of adoption and custody should be discussed and documented for future reference (Mader, 2001).

- Understand that enrollment in a school district may be problematic. Some issues that may need to be addressed include lack of proof of legal guardianship, transportation to another district, possible fees for out of district enrollment, and development of an individual education plan (IEP) for students with special needs (Mader, 2001).

- Be aware of the financial constraints that grandparents who live on fixed incomes suffer, as well as insurance coverage limits of Medicare. Make grandparents aware that financial assistance can be obtained through various agency resources, such as Department of Jobs and Family Services, Supplemental Security Income, SS Survivors Benefits, Medicaid, Earned Income Tax Credit, or Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (Mader, 2001).
Suggestions for Working With Kinship Care Families

• Recognize the stress (emotional, physical, and psychological) that raising young children creates for older adults. Refer grandparents to school personnel who are helpful: the guidance counselor, principal, school nurse, or school psychologist (Edwards & Daire, 2006).

• Explore the possibility of forming support groups for grandparents parenting for the second time. Help grandparents find child-care sources for times when the pressure of parenting is overwhelming and they need a break (Mader, 2001).

• Although there are many children’s books available that show loving relationships of children with their grandparents or grandparents living in their homes, there aren’t as many available with the family type of children being raised by grandparents.
Suggestions for Working With Same-Sex Families

- Does the school have an antidiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation that is communicated to families (Gelnaw et al., 2004)?
- Does the school use forms that have spaces for “mother’s name” and “father’s name?” A space for “parents’ names” or “family members” would be more appropriate.

- Do school administrators establish a model for an inclusive environment? School leaders should set the tone for welcoming LGBT families by making sure that they do not tolerate bias toward families among the faculty and staff.
Suggestions for Working With Same-Sex Families

- Do all teachers understand the appropriate terminology to use relating to LGBT families? Do they find out what a parent prefers to be called or just make an assumption?
- Does the school hold celebrations such as Mother’s Day or Father’s Day? It can easily be called Family Day (Gonzalez-Mena, 2007).
- Does the school censor materials that depict same-sex families? Will school administrators support teachers if they are criticized by other parents or the community for sharing children’s books with same-sex families?
Suggestions for Working With Adoptive Families

- Become familiar with the family situation and what children know or do not know about their biological parents. Find out what the parents want shared about the adoption in the classroom. Respect a family’s wishes for privacy about the adoption.

- Avoid stereotyping adopted children as being more at risk of emotional, behavioral, or academic problems. Adopted children have the same capacity for academic and social success as nonadopted children (Gajda, 2004).
Suggestions for Working With Adoptive Families

- Allow children adopted from other cultures to share something about their culture of origin, but be aware that culture is learned and not biological. Children adopted from a foreign country as small children will not have an understanding of that culture unless they have been taught about it.

- For newly adopting parents, share observations and specific information about what the child is like in the school setting.
Suggestions for Working With Adoptive Families

• Avoid projects that may be difficult for adopted children, such as family histories that are based on biological family relationships and require photos or mementos. Be aware that adopted children may not have photos of themselves as babies. Be open to classroom discussion about the differences in families when discussing family histories.

• Offer parent education materials and support groups for adoptive families to help them understand the developmental shifts that children experience about being adopted as they grow and mature.

• As with the other family types, it is important to share children’s literature with your class that shows a variety of family types, including adoptive families.
Summary

Although this chapter has examined the diversity that exists among families in their structure, it is essential that you do not develop stereotypes about families, such as viewing all single-parent families as being low-income or all blended families as having conflicts. It is also important that you realize that there is a great diversity within each family type. In fact, the results of one study suggest that it is less important to focus on the structure of the family than it is to learn about how the family functions and the relationships among its members (Georgas et al., 2001).
Reference


(All in-text citations can be found in the reference section at the end of the text)