

Strategies in Action: Family Engagement

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PreK Language Model: English Language Development with Home Language Support

Setting and Background:

Teacher Lisa is a bilingual (Spanish-English) lead teacher in a San Francisco area preschool program. She has nineteen children, ages 3–4, in her classroom: ten monolingual English speakers, five who speak mostly Spanish in the home, three who speak Mandarin Chinese and English, and one child, Hien, who speaks Vietnamese and English. Nahm, a three-year-old child whose family recently immigrated from a mountainous, rural area of Vietnam has just enrolled. During intake, Teacher Lisa learns that the family had been farmers in Quảng Nam Province and had pooled all their resources for a difficult immigration in 2017. Nahm’s older brother and sister were born in Vietnam while he was born in the U.S. The family received resettlement support and have many friends and relatives in the community. After several weeks in the classroom, Teacher Lisa observes that Nahm, although polite and good-natured, rarely engages with the other children and avoids contact with adults in the classroom.

Teacher Behavior:

As there is already one child from a Vietnamese-speaking family, Teacher Lisa has learned a few phrases in Vietnamese to help make Hien and his family feel welcome in the classroom. However, Hien and Nahm have very different family backgrounds: Hien’s family had been IT professionals from Saigon who transferred to the Bay Area for job opportunities, while Nahm’s family had little formal education and immigrated to the U.S. for health and safety reasons. After reflecting on her level of understanding of Nahm’s cultural background and family circumstances, Teacher Lisa realized she needed to engage more deeply with Nahm’s family to develop a partnership based on mutual respect and shared goals. She needed to establish a two-way communication that would allow sharing of essential information and collaborating around important goals for Nahm.

The first step for Teacher Lisa is to schedule a conversation with Nahm’s parents to explore critical aspects of his background, family culture, language practices, and educational priorities. Since Teacher Lisa does not speak Vietnamese, she will need to ask her administrator to locate a bilingual interpreter who is fully fluent in English and Vietnamese to facilitate the discussion. As with all of her students, Teacher Lisa will approach the conversation with an asset-based approach. She will bring an open mind and an open heart to help her identify the linguistic, cultural, and familial strengths of Nahm’s family so they can be integrated into the classroom environment and activities. For instance, Teacher Lisa learns that Nahm’s family knows a great deal about growing plants and herbs in climates similar to San Francisco, which could be integrated into a unit on plants and vegetables for the whole class.

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The conversation can be guided by tools such as the [Family Languages and Interests Interview form](#) recommended by the California Department of Education and contained in the [California Preschool Program Guidelines](#). During this initial conversation, it will be important for Teacher Lisa to find out about Nahm's early language exposure, who his primary caregivers are, and how much time he has experienced in which languages. It is also important to find out about the family's language preferences, their educational aspirations, cultural values, and special hobbies or talents they could share with the class. This is also an ideal time to invite Nahm's parents or other relatives as volunteers to help bring Nahm's culture and language into the classroom by telling stories, reading to individual groups, helping with labeling, or simply introducing new words in Vietnamese.

Teacher Lisa can also use this time to help Nahm's family understand the importance of continuing to use and develop their home language, Vietnamese. There are many resources available for families that describe the important role of maintaining their home language that Teacher Lisa can share during this conversation. She can also explore Nahm's special interests and favorite games that will be useful in developing instructional activities that can be supported in the home.

By reaching out to families, demonstrating respect for their particular language and culture, and valuing their customs and priorities, Teacher Lisa will promote a strong school-family connection that is essential for Nahm's educational success. The ability to hear, see, and use his home language in the classroom will help Nahm feel welcome and accepted.

Reflection questions

1. How have you established partnerships with families from different cultures and language groups? Are there any strategies that Teacher Lisa used that you might apply in your own classroom?
2. Why is it important for Nahm's family to feel accepted and respected by Teacher Lisa? How do you help families feel accepted and respected?
3. Have you experienced any barriers to effective school-home partnerships? How have you overcome those barriers?