Infants & Toddlers

Family Engagement

Families: An Introduction

Family members are the most important people in young children's lives, and impact how infants and toddlers develop and learn. To effectively develop partnerships with families and to help create an environment that meets the needs of each infant and toddler in their care, it is important for caregivers to understand families as a system and the impact of parenting in early childhood. This lesson shares perspectives for understanding families and provides an introduction to family-centered practice.

Objectives

- Identify your personal views and the importance of families.
- Recognize family-centered practice as a key component of early childhood education.
- Examine individual family systems in which infants and toddlers grow and develop.
- Recognize the diversity of families.

Learn

Know

What are Your Views About Family?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word *family*? Perhaps thoughts of individuals who have influenced and shaped your life, or images of people coming together to celebrate holidays and other significant cultural events; maybe smells of home-cooked food, memories of conversations or arguments you had with loved ones, feelings of love, joy, or even sadness.

Family is central to an individual's life. Particularly when it comes to infants and young children, family members assume critical roles that significantly affect children's well-being and development. As a professional working with infants and toddlers, it is critical for you to appreciate and understand children's families. This lesson will familiarize you with current perspectives on how families are viewed and how they function. This information will provide helpful context in order to better understand your work and interactions with families.

The Meaning of Family

When you think of the word "family," what does it mean to you? Who makes up *your* family? What kinds of things do you do together? What role do you play in your family?

Every family is different and it is important to keep an open mind about what and who makes up a family. Each person defines family in his or her own way. For some, family may represent those individuals living in the same home (under one roof). For others, family may be the infant or toddler's parents and all of the important adults who help care for the young child, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, or even a best friend. Family is typically consistent in the infant or toddler's life and can be one of the most important sources of information about the child.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines a family as "a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together." The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2011, p. 3) suggests that "the term *family* may include those adults, besides parents, with the responsibility of being involved in educating, nurturing, and advocating for the child." Researchers studying and working with families define *family* as "two or more people who regard themselves as a family and who carry out the functions that families typically perform. These people may or may not be related by blood or marriage and may or may not usually live together" (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006, p. 7).

What are some things that stand out to you as you read these definitions? You may notice that the first definition is quite specific in terms of how relationships are described, whereas the other two definitions are broader. As a professional working with young children, it is important to acknowledge that your own experiences influence your views about families and working with families. You will encounter individuals who define family differently than you do and who may share values, customs, or codes of behavior that are different from yours. When you encounter differing views, it is important to keep an open mind to better understand how each person's family may have affected and shaped them into who they are today.

Like individuals, families are varied. Family structures have become more diverse through shared custody, same-sex couple families, families where members have different immigration statuses, and when a parent has children with multiple partners. While these circumstances do not always bring challenges, research suggests that children whose family structures are complex may be more likely to experience negative consequences, such as less caregiving from a parent. Today, 40 percent of children are born to unmarried parents. Like the concept of 'family,' the concept of family well-being is also challenging to define. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that family well-being occurs when all family members are safe, healthy, and have chances for educational advancement and economic mobility. Support services such as early care and education, housing and food assistance, and physical and mental health care positively contribute to the well-being of families and their children. When families face challenges that cause stress, including poverty and homelessness, their health and wellness can be negatively impacted. Engaging families as active participants in problem-solving and goal-setting can help them identify and use their own strengths to address the challenges they face. When families are healthy, safe, and economically stable, their children's health and well-being can thrive. As you think about how best to engage with and support the families in your program, consider your role in strengthening

families' protective factors. The good news is that many of the behaviors that correspond to positive family functioning can be "taught and strengthened with education." (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019, p. 42).

How are Families Viewed Today? Introducing Family-Centered Practice

Families are partners, active participants, and decision makers in their children's education process because of their impact and effect on child development, particularly when it comes to the early-childhood years. As a result, *family-centered practice* is considered one of the indicators of quality in early childhood education, programs, and services. At the heart of family-centered practice is the belief that families are the most important decision makers in a child's life (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005).

Family-centered practice also means that you understand the important and large effect all family members have on each other and on the infant or toddler. All family members are interconnected, and affect each other and the ways that the family functions. From our family, we learn skills that enable us to engage and learn in school and excel in the workplace.

When considering family-centered practice, you are viewing infants and toddlers as part of a larger system; you are viewing their family as a whole. You become aware of and sensitive to the interactions and relationships taking place within the family, as well as outside interactions and supports that affect them. To maintain relationships and to work effectively together, you learn, respect and understand characteristics of each family and its support system. You can also consider the characteristics and stressors of families which may negatively affect their involvement. What affects one family member can affect all family members. A family is a system in which no one member can be viewed in isolation.

Throughout the Virtual Laboratory School, we consider family-centered practice as an umbrella term that encompasses the beliefs and actions of people in your program. Consider this graphic:

Family-Centered Practice

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Beliefs	Actions
Families are the most important decision-makers in a child's life.	• *We ask and learn about families' ideas and preferences.* • *We provide choices in programming.* • *We involve families in program leadership.* • *We involve families in decision-making.*

Beliefs	Actions
Families are unique and their differences enrich our programs.	• *We honor and respect diversity.* • *We involve all the important people in a child's life.* • *We engage and involve families.* • *We develop responsive and reciprocal relationships.* • *We represent families in our programs.*
Families are resilient.	• *We learn about families' strengths, needs, and circumstances.* • *We connect families with resources.* • *We build families' strengths.*
Families are central to development and learning.	• *We share information with families.* • *We listen to families.* • *We view families as their child's first teacher.* • *We respect families' expertise about their child.*
Families are our partners.	• *We use respectful, responsive, and two-way communication.* • *We reach out to families.* • *We involve families in all aspects of our program.*

Making an effort to understand infants, toddlers, and their families can create opportunities for you to better support the infants and toddlers in your care.

Honoring Diversity in Families

Some very important learning in the first three years of life relates to culture. For example, infants and toddlers learn new words, ways of interacting with others, how to communicate, self-help skills and how to play — all things influenced by culture. Culture refers to the shared traditions, experiences and history of different groups of people. Cultural differences may include differences in views of family and community, expectations of children, roles of parents and children, and value placed on education.

Culture plays a significant role in the way families raise their children and how you, as a caregiver, provide care for their infants and toddlers. Examine your own cultural experiences and consider how they may affect your practice with infants, toddlers and families. Each caregiver brings specific values, beliefs and assumptions about

child rearing and development to their work. In almost every child-care routine you perform, your values about it were shaped by your childhood and training. As you work with infants, toddlers and families, it is important to recognize your values and beliefs and the ways in which they may differ from others. For example, a parent might expect a toddler to begin using a spoon and fork around age 3 when you might expect this behavior around 20 months.

Sometimes, you might feel unsure about how to care for an infant or toddler or how to engage families who have very different experiences and cultures, including those who speak an unfamiliar language or practice unfamiliar religious customs. You can acknowledge these differences and express an interest in the family to build a relationship and learn ways to provide support to their infants and toddlers in your care. For example, you can learn how and when families feed their infants, which is influenced by culture and affects development. When differences are viewed through the lens of culture, respectful conversations can lead to an agreement in how these practices will be supported in an early care and learning environment.

Early care and learning settings provide an environment in which adults and children can learn about and honor differences in values, beliefs and perceptions. Learning one's culture occurs primarily within the family, however, in early care and learning environments infants and toddlers also learn about culture and experience relationships that influence their sense of who they are and who they will become.

To help children develop this sense of who they are and who they will become, you must honor and celebrate the diversity of families. Diversity exists on a variety of dimensions:

- Composition (who is a member of the family)
- Race and ethnicity
- Language
- Socioeconomic status
- Sexual orientation
- Ability or disability
- Educational background
- Values and traditions
- Child-rearing practices
- Religious preferences
- Gender roles and responsibilities

Being a responsive caregiver to infants and toddlers means that you demonstrate sensitivity and consideration for the multiple backgrounds, experiences, values, and contexts in which children and families live.

See

Do

There is a lot you can do to show that you value the families of infants and toddlers in your program. Consider the following guidelines that reflect family-centered practice, and then think about how you can use these guidelines in your work with children and families.

- Recognize the family as the constant in the child's life and that they have the largest impact and influence on that child.
- Facilitate collaboration between families and professionals.
- Encourage family-to-family support and networking.
- Honor and respect family diversity in all dimensions (cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, spiritual, socio-economic, or in terms of family members' sexual orientation). You may do this by:
  - Asking families about their **home language and to share key phrases** they use at home.
  - Having **family information and children's books in the languages of each family.**
  - Inviting the family to visit the setting and **sing songs, tell stories, and show books or pictures that demonstrate their culture**, and, for toddlers, introduce culturally specific foods.
  - **Observe how a family interacts** with their infant or toddler.
  - Asking families to **create a family or neighborhood storybook**.
  - **Meeting regularly** with families to learn about their hopes, dreams and goals for their infant or toddler.
  - Celebrate a variety of holidays and traditions important to those children in your care.

Watch this video to learn more about family-centered practice and what it means to value the family as a whole.

Completing in this Course

For more information on what to expect in this course, the Family Engagement *Competency Reflection*, and a list of the accompanying Learn, Explore and Apply resources and activities offered throughout the lessons, visit the Infant & Toddler Family Engagement *Course Guide*.

Please note the References & Resources section at the end of each lesson outlines reference sources and resources to find additional information on the topics covered. As you complete lessons, you are not expected to review all the online references available. However, you are welcome to explore the resources further if you have

interest, or at the request of your trainer, coach, or administrator.

Explore

The Things to Consider activity outlines questions caregivers can ask themselves when considering family-centered practice in their work. Answer the questions and then share your thoughts and responses with a trainer, coach, or administrator.

Next, watch this video to learn more about how caregivers' own experiences impact their work with infants, toddlers and families.

Things to Consider

Understanding families helps support their children

Apply

In this lesson, you were introduced to family-centered practice. Take a look at these guidelines and try to come up with examples of ways you can show consideration of these guidelines in your classroom. Write your thoughts as they relate to each guideline. Then, share your responses with a trainer, coach, or administrator.

Families provide valuable information on ways to improve classroom and program practices. Use the *Family Questionnaire* handout to gather feedback from families in your classroom on ways to improve your current practices and support your professional development goals. CDA candidates should use the *CDA Family Questionnaire* for this activity.

Family-Centered Practice: First Thoughts

Brainstorm ways to increase family involvement at your center

Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator

Family Questionnaire

Engage families in feedback around your strengths and opportunities for growth.

CDA Family Questionnaire

This family questionnaire is required for the CDA Professional Portfolio and should be used by CDA candidates only.

GLOSSARY

Culture:
A set of shared values, attitudes, or practices that characterize certain groups of individuals

Diversity:
The inclusion of different types of people in an organization

Family-centered practice:
A philosophy or way of thinking that supports practices in which families are considered central and the most important decision makers in a child's life. More specifically, this philosophy recognizes that the family is the constant in a child's life and that service systems and providers must support, respect, encourage, and enhance the strengths of the family

Parenting Style:
Strategies, methods and behaviors that parents use to raise their child

Demonstrate

Q1 True or False? Family-centered practice means viewing infants and toddlers as individuals. *

- ○ True
- ○ False

Q2 Finish this statement: To honor and celebrate the diversity of families it is important to recognize that diversity includes... *

- O values and traditions.
- O race and ethnicity.
- O socioeconomic status.
- O All of the above

Q3 It is important to understand and appreciate children's families because... *

- O it will make your job easier.
- O you are the child's most important caregiver and teacher.
- O families play a critical role in children's well-being and development.
- O families are all very similar.

References & Resources

Baker, A. C., & Manfredi/Petitt L.A.. (2004). Relationships, the Heart of Quality Care: Creating community among adults in early care settings. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2005). Attachment and separation. In Diversity in Early Care and Education, 4th ed., (pp. 79–91). New York: McGraw-Hill.

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