

# Early Learning Center



## Engaging and Supporting Diverse Families in Infant/Toddler Care Settings

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“The heart of anti-bias work is a vision of a world in which all children are able to blossom, and each child’s particular abilities and gifts are able to flourish.” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010)



University programs for young children often serve families from a broad range of diversity, including variations in nationality, ethnicity, race, language, family economics, religion, and many other dimensions of culture. This post outlines some of the concepts and practices we use at the Early Learning Center to strive toward cultural responsiveness with families and to collaborate with parents in providing optimal care and learning

opportunities for young children. We will also highlight ways of serving families whose nationalities and language backgrounds differ from their children's teachers. Practicing cultural competence with families is particularly relevant in infant/toddler settings which are the sites of intersection of many differences in caregiving approaches, especially in regard to daily care routines. We will feature two examples in particular from one of our looping classrooms, with highlights from Lizzie Kelly (Demonstration Teacher from the Hickory class) and families she has worked with to build collaboration surrounding culture and language.

## Conceptual Background



As a research center housed in the Child and Family Studies department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, our program is led not only by the mission of the Early Learning Center (<https://elc.utk.edu/mission/>), but also by the broader goals of our home department. Part of the mission of both the ELC and our department involves studying families in context. Our work is informed by a

multidisciplinary approach that considers the situated nature of children's development in context, not only of their current home, but the cultural home that informs the family's views and beliefs about how children are cared for and supported in their learning. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model plays a significant role in our work; his model portrays children at the center of multiple layers and systems of cultural influences, from the everyday interactions with immediate family and caregivers to broad community contexts and cultural norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thinking about the layers of influence on family routines, values, and beliefs not only broadens our view of each child's personal social ecology, but also creates openings for communicating with families about how their home practices intersect with caregiving routines at our center. Our work is also informed by the theoretical contributions of Rogoff (2003), who conceptualized a dynamic process between individuals and communities wherein children develop by participating in a wide range of shared experiences and

cultural practices on a day to day basis. Rogoff acknowledges that individuals and communities change over time, across generations, and that variation exists both within and across cultural communities. Thus, in our work with families, it is important to take into account the particular cultural identities and experiences of the children and families we serve at any point in time. We cannot presume the ways we think Chinese families will approach sleep routines, or how most Hispanic families would approach dual language learning. We must take the time to learn about each of our families to understand how to best partner with them to bridge possible differences in life at home and life in our center. We must aim to stay in close engagement with our families who differ from our teachers, and commit to honor and respect family values and priorities. We also hope to recognize each family's unique strengths while building a community of care and learning in which all our families experience a sense of belonging and trust.



Concepts and strategies for these efforts also derive from the literature review by Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, and Moodie (2009) (<http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Family%20Engagement%20Halgunseth.pdf>), which relies upon ecological and social exchange theories. This review forms the basis for recommended approaches outline below. In addition, the work at our center is influenced by the recent work on leading anti-bias early childhood programs by Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, Nimmo, & Souto-Manning (2014). Children's families are not only a factor we should consider or take into account when providing care for young children. Families are, rather, the most important resource and asset to us as providers. Family culture includes a wide array of resources to consider, beyond nationality, race, and language:



Since all children are rooted in their families, it may make sense to elevate a child's family structure and all that it entails as the core of their family's culture. This structure encompasses family socioeconomic status, family compositions, parent's level of educational attainment, abilities of children and family members, family's immigration status, family's religion, family's home and preferred languages, parent's sexual orientation, and the way that a family classifies its race and ethnicity. (NAEYC, 2009)

NAEYC has provided benchmarks for cultural competence as well as resources for programs to build practices in this arena. The Quality Benchmark for Cultural Competence Project (2009) focused on defining cultural competence for early childhood programs and outlined a set of seven recommended approaches for early childhood programs. From these approaches, a tool was also developed to help programs implement culturally competent practices. These, and other tools and resources, can be accessed [through this link to the NAEYC website \(https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/cultural-competence\)](https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/cultural-competence). The highlights we are sharing in this piece are anchored in the following seven approaches that are included in the benchmark tool:

1. Acknowledge that children are nested in families and communities with unique strengths. Recognize and mitigate the tension between the early childhood profession's perceptions of the child as the center of the work versus the family as the center of the work.
2. Build on and identify the strengths and shared goals between the profession and families and recognize commonalities in order to meet these goals.
3. Understand and authentically incorporate the traditions and history of the program participants and their impacts on child-rearing practices.
4. Actively support each child's development within the family as complex and culturally-driven ongoing experiences.
5. Recognize and demonstrate awareness that individuals' and institutions' practices are embedded in culture.
6. Ensure that decisions and policies regarding all aspects of a program embrace and respect participants' language, values, attitudes, beliefs, and approaches to learning.
7. Ensure that policies and practices build upon the home languages and dialects of the children, families, and staff in programs and support the preservation of home languages.

In the following vignettes from infant/toddler teacher Lizzie Kelly, we share some of the ways relationship-building in our programs supports several of these approaches. Partnering with families begins before children enroll in our program and continues through transition planning and while children and families settle into their new care arrangements. Collaborations are built through formal and informal processes so parents and teachers can be fully engaged together in two-way exchanges and decisions about how to handle routines, curriculum, and other developmental supports. Lizzie shares some reflections about working with two families whose family cultural life factored into designing caregiving and learning routines and also shares insights directly from the voices of the parents.



## Family Sleeping

*Lizzie consulted with Xiaodong, Tiffany's mother, when piecing together this narrative about their dialogue surrounding the family's approaches to Tiffany's sleeping habits.*

When the Yu family enrolled in our classroom I setup up a home visit, which is a typical first step for new families who come into our infant/toddler classrooms. On my visit with the Yu family, I met Tiffany, a vivacious two-year-old girl who loves to talk, joke and interact with adults. During the visit I noticed her telling toddler jokes in both English and Chinese, and at that moment I was so impressed and intrigued with her and so glad that she would be entering our class. In addition to getting to meet Tiffany, I was able to talk to her parents to get to know a wide range of caregiving information, including that they felt that Tiffany struggles with sleep routines. Tiffany's mother, Xiaodong, reported that Tiffany liked to talk and play in the bed instead of sleeping. Mom's commentary made sense to me; Tiffany is very communicative and I could imagine that she might like to use her co-sleeping time with mom and her older brother as a time for intimate conversations and bonding.

Once Tiffany began attending our classroom every day, I noticed that she would occasionally come in later in the morning. One morning during a late drop off, it seemed like Xiaodong was a little upset and I invited her to sit in the classroom and talk with me. She reported that their struggles with co-sleeping were getting more challenging and thus, they would let Tiffany sleep late to make sure she got a good night's sleep. I agreed that letting Tiffany get rest was a compassionate and understandable decision. Then we talked through some strategies to help decrease the amount of conversation and playful interactions that both Tiffany and her brother were having at bedtime. All seemed to be going well after our conversation, but, I wanted to make sure that I checked in with Xiaodong several weeks later about their progress with sleep during our semesterly parent conference. I knew, given how vivacious and conversational that both Tiffany and her brother are, that playful bedtimes might still be posing a challenge at home.





In our parent conference, Xiaodong did remark that conversational and playful bedtimes were still very much a struggle. Going into our conference, I knew that Xiaodong's mother- and father-in-law were both visiting from China. I thought about this as an opportunity; I wanted to work with this family, and all families I work with, using a family strengths-based and individualized approach. I knew from my reading about parenting practices in China that it can be customary for children to co-sleep with not only parents but grandparents as well. I felt it was important to view facets of their caregiving practices first with a lens of respect for the family's home culture. To be specific, I felt it was important to honor their decision to co-sleep with

their children as opposed to encouraging them to adopt a more typically American practice of Tiffany sleeping by herself in her room. The practice of co-sleeping is one that is common in many cultures and is borne out of compassion and emotional responsiveness to the child. Thus, I viewed the practice of co-sleeping as a family strength, a practice that conveys love and responsiveness to the child. Additionally, in light of the grandparents' visit, I was curious if the family might be willing to let Tiffany or her brother co-sleep with their grandparents in order to help reduce the playfulness at bedtime and smooth out the sleeping routines for everyone in the home.

During our conference, I asked Xiaogong whether she might be willing to allow Tiffany or her brother to sleep with their grandparents. Xiaodong's response to me was very interesting, and she shared her personal thoughts regarding co-sleeping with grandparents. She felt that co-sleeping was definitely the best choice to support both of her children. However, she did not want her children to co-sleep with grandparents because they might have difficulty encouraging either child to go to sleep at a reasonable time and this would interrupt their school schedules. Xiaodong wanted to make sure her children got the best sleep possible.



In addition, she remarked that she personally believed that "children did better with their parents." In her view, children tended to follow requests and expectations better from the parents. Thus, for their family, better sleep results would be achieved by the siblings co-sleeping with mom. During our conversation, I felt a sense of happiness in gaining a better understanding of Xiaodong's decision-making process. Originally, I had hoped to encourage the grandparents' support in the sleep routine

as a way to alleviate bedtime routine difficulties. However, Xiaodong was able to clarify for me that grandparent intervention would actually make bedtime more stressful. I felt that I was witnessing a special moment in which Xiaodong was able to preserve a traditional parenting practice in her home, while at the same time communicate her views about how the arrangement would work best for her children.

Another important facet of supporting this family was that I wanted to share my intention to honor the family's decision to co-sleep with my classroom staff that is composed of an assistant teacher and a few pre-service teachers. I was careful not to make the assumption that all staff members were aware that co-sleeping might be a culturally-based parenting practice. Additionally, I wanted the other classroom staff to join me in viewing co-sleeping as a family strength. If we choose to view co-sleeping through a strictly mainstream American (dominant culture) lens, the practice can be viewed by some people as a deficit and or as indulgent, disruptive or unsafe. Thus, when I conducted the conference with Xiaodong, I made sure that my new teaching partner, Amy, would be able attend the conference as well. This gave Amy the opportunity to observe how I approached bedtime routine problem solving with a parent while honoring the decision to co-sleep. After the conference, Amy and I then discussed the conference with our student intern in our weekly collaboration meeting. We were able to share our satisfaction in understanding Xiaodong better as a parent. In addition, I was also able to have a very explicit conversation with our student about the nature of communication about sleep practices. I was able to convey to her that I did not go into the conference with any intention of telling the family that they should adopt the western practice of having the child sleep alone in their room. Instead, I let our student know in a very direct way that my intention was to let the family know that I wanted to engage in problem-solving strategies that fit within the preferred co-sleeping arrangement.

When I asked Xiaodong what she thought was important teachers to know about working with international families, she offered the following:

"I really wish she [Tiffany] loves our Chinese culture, she loves Chinese language, she feels proud of our culture, instead of feeling embarrassed. No matter where you are coming from, I just wish teachers, or friends, or even my friends ... they respect your background. I just wish that Tiffany will have that feeling around her that it's okay that I'm coming from China, it's okay I have Chinese roots, it's okay that I have different backgrounds, and that teachers and friends, they respect about that and sometimes they show curiosity about that and hopefully when she gets older she gets a chance to introduce Chinese cultures."[/highlight]



## Connections with recommended practices

The efforts Lizzie and her team made in this case represent a core value and approach to family differences that are rooted in beliefs about how to foster relationships with families. Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, and Nimmo (2014) advocate that anti-bias efforts include treating families as true partners, stating that it is critical to “engage in reciprocal partnerships, to exchange information and learn from them, and to provide a welcoming stance for all families” (p. 70). This type of relationship began with Lizzie’s home visit and her welcoming stance toward the family. She actively sought information from the family and about their routines and home life. When it came time to talk through sleep concerns from Mom, Lizzie also placed high value on Xiaodong’s unique blend of cultural practice and

personal parenting values that went beyond a distal understanding of cultural norms from Chinese families. Knowing about a different culture, in this sense, was helpful, but was only the beginning stage of the process of listening to this particular family’s concerns and wishes. The key approach rested in a stance toward families that values their perspective, their culture, and their goals.

The efforts made by Lizzie and her team, in this case, represent several layers of responsiveness to family culture, some of which are represented in the following approaches from NAEYC’s (2009) benchmarks:

1. Acknowledge that children are nested in families and communities with unique strengths. Recognize and mitigate the tension between the early childhood profession’s perceptions of the child as the center of the work versus the family as the center of the work.
2. Build on and identify the strengths and shared goals between the profession and families and recognize commonalities in order to meet these goals.
3. Understand and authentically incorporate the traditions and history of the program participants and their impacts on child rearing practices.
4. Actively support each child’s development within the family as complex and culturally-driven ongoing experiences.
5. Recognize and demonstrate awareness that individuals’ and institutions’ practices are embedded in culture.

The dialogue between Lizzie and Xiaodong resembles approaches #1, #2, and #3 above, in that Lizzie wanted to gain information from the family in a way that the family's unique cultural composition could be an asset to figuring out how to address sleep concerns. Approach #4 relates to the way Lizzie acknowledged the situated processes of family dynamics and culture that Xiaodong and Tiffany were experiencing in the overall family system. In regard to approach #5, it was important for the teachers to recognize that the dominant cultural practice around co-sleeping might present challenges in the relationship-building work. Lizzie acknowledged this and actively worked to navigate the differences between the family's culture and the mainstream cultural context of the program/institution. When a majority of the teachers in a program mirror the dominant culture, it is critical to provide leadership and help program staff navigate their positionality to help families feel welcomed and valued.



## Itzel's Language

*Lizzie worked with Jessica, Itzel's mother, in reconstructing this vignette about their work together on bridging between home and school to support Itzel's dual-language development.*

Itzel began in our classroom as a seven-week-old infant and now is a 17-month-old toddler. We stay in regular communication with her parents, Jessica and Arturo, regarding her English and Spanish language acquisition. When I recently asked Jessica if she had initial concerns about Itzel's dual language development, she responded:

"Yeah, I was a little concerned at first, but I was very relieved when you asked about wanting to bridge that and I was really happy to know that you were willing to work with us and it was a two-way deal."

Once Itzel began to share language at school, we began talking to mom and dad about which words she was sharing with them and we got clarification about how she pronounced the words and how we should pronounce the words. As a part of our regular, ongoing, curriculum-embedded assessment and planning, we keep word lists in both languages to track her progress in acquiring two languages. In addition, we also have frequent conversations with mom and dad about how her communication habits change. As an infant when we tried to use the Spanish language with her she would cry, and she seemed disconcerted. We assumed this was a reminder of mom and dad and it made her sad or anxious over their absence. But, as she has gotten older, she has begun to use a mixture of Spanish and English at school, and currently, she is more accepting of her English-speaking teachers using

Spanish. Now we are using special or meaningful Spanish words with her at school and reading Spanish books as well. Jessica and Arturo often donate Spanish language books to the classroom that Itzel enjoys. In sharing these books from home we may share Spanish reading experiences with her that are rooted in her interests and stem from her collection of treasured books at home.

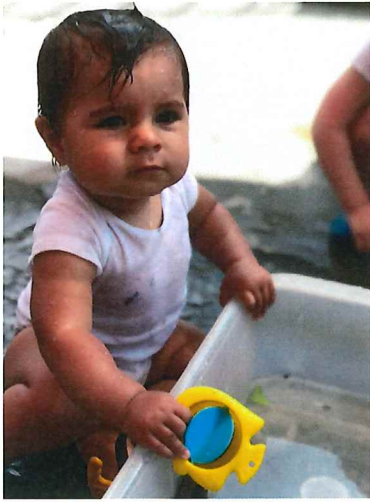


In late Autumn, Jessica noted that Itzel started initiating all conversations in English and it worried her. I encouraged her to make all her responses in Spanish as she always does and to prompt Itzel to repeat in Spanish.



Through observing Itzel, we have noticed that she is very willing to engage in this sort of language repetition interaction with adults. We also discussed how Itzel does enjoy testing boundaries or doing social experiments with adults especially if the adult makes exaggerated faces reflecting surprise or irritation in response to her behavior. I mentioned to Jessica that Itzel likes to make requests for food and other things in Spanish and often watches our faces closely to see our response. I mentioned that when she does this, we are careful to not look shocked. We usually repeat what she has said to clarify her request. Then we try (as much as we can) to respond in Spanish because this makes Itzel happy and seems to increase our bond with her. We also hope that it communicates that we accept and value speaking Spanish in our classroom.

In addition to increasing our bond with Itzel and communicating our acceptance of her home language, the use of Spanish at school allows Itzel to make unique contributions in a toddler classroom. One of the favorite meals in our classroom is taco soup day, and it is served with tortilla chips. Often times, the chips are one of the most popular items on the table that day, and they happen to be Itzel's favorite food on that menu day. One day, to request more chips at the table Itzel said, "Mas!" and I responded, "Did you say mas? Do you want more chips?" Itzel grinned and nodded yes in response. As I handed out the chips I simply repeated "mas" as I laid the chips on her plate.



Itzel smiled from ear to ear repeating “mas” and nodding at me. She seemed to confirm that I understood her well. Her contentment in being understood seemed to generate more excitement in her and she spent the next few moments repeating the word “mas” and watching me to see if I repeated it back to her (which I did of course). The emotional context of our interaction was warm and gleeful, and the other children at the table began to notice. Other children at the table began to grin, seemingly in response to the interaction that Itzel and I were having. Then, one of the toddlers requested more chips by saying, “Mas!” and another child quickly chimed in “Mas!”. Both of

these peers were smiling broadly. I passed out their chips and remarked “Mas!” As I turned my attention back to Itzel, she seemed to be bubbling over with excitement. She had done something that all toddlers like to do: initiate a simple and successful interaction or game with a friend. When toddlers are successful at prompting these moments they feel powerful, proud, and joyful. While the interaction was simple and circulated around just one word, it allowed Itzel (the youngest of the cohort) to be powerful. She was able to introduce the word that generated lots of excitement and glee among her friends and smiles from her teacher. In essence, Itzel was a teacher for the others, an initiator of excitement and a capable communicator of her needs.



When asked what has been most helpful to them as a family, Jessica shared:

“What’s helpful is that we’re all willing to work with each other. That’s the most important. I know you have dual language books on the shelf, which is amazing. And I know Amy, in a couple of instances, has told me about counting snaps on her onesies with her, and she’s very happy about that and Itzel’s very receptive.”

## Connections with Recommended Practices

Teachers and caregivers play a critical role in the language learning and social development of young children who are learning multiple languages. For Lizzie, it was very important to talk to Jessica about the family’s wishes for Itzel. This helped get the partnering relationship off to a good start, and then specific shared strategies through two-way communication can grow based on close observation of the child’s experiences across

home and school contexts. For Itzel's family, it was very important that the program and teachers built upon their home language and their goals for Itzel as a dual language learner. The vignette about Itzel illustrate ways to put approaches #2, #5, and #7 from the NAEYC benchmarks into practice:

2. Build on and identify the strengths and shared goals between the profession and families and recognize commonalities in order to meet these goals.
5. Recognize and demonstrate awareness that individuals' and institutions' practices are embedded in culture.
7. Ensure that policies and practices build upon the home languages and dialects of the children, families, and staff in programs and support the preservation of home languages.

In this case, Jessica and Arturo were eager to partner and communicate about shared language goals for Itzel. Their concerns about Itzel's English-only initiations emphasized the need for approach #5, which acknowledges the English-dominant context of Itzel's classroom and the dynamic nature of her daily overlap between two language settings. It was important for the classroom staff to hear Jessica's concern and work toward shared response patterns across home and school to help foster Itzel's Spanish language growth. Likewise, in relation to approach #7, multiple strategies by classroom staff were made to explicitly value and preserve Itzel's Spanish language use, in age-appropriate ways, which Lizzie tied to Itzel's budding social skills as a member of her classroom. The mealtime conversation Lizzie fostered elevated Itzel's language and made language difference a welcomed and valued asset to the community. The warmth and fun interactions from her classroom community contribute to Itzel gaining a sense of belonging in the classroom, not just as a toddler who must join the dominant language and culture of her school, but as a child who brings her whole self, Spanish included, to the lunch table. Instead of smoothing over and downplaying the differences children bring to our programs, it's more helpful to role model for children how we can embrace differences, be curious and interested in them, and, when children are ready, discuss the many differences children recognize in each other and amongst their families (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010 (<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/anti-bias-education>); LeeKeenan & Allen, 2017 (<http://www.antibiasleadersece.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ABE-LeeKeenan-Allen.pdf>)).

## Summary

The vignettes shared by Lizzie represent some ways to implement culturally responsive relationship building and the recommended approaches outlined from the NAEYC Quality Benchmark for Cultural Competence Project (2009). It is our hope that the specificity of the vignettes shared here also communicate the need to cater the approaches to each individual family. The ways practices are