

Establishing Partnerships with Families

Who is a parent?

For the purposes of this tool kit, “parent” is defined to include, in addition to a natural parent, a legal guardian or other person standing in loco parentis (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare)¹.

The Diverse Characteristics of Newcomer Families

Families usually leave their country of origin for one or more of the following reasons: (1) to seek better educational opportunities, (2) to enhance economic opportunity, (3) to unify the family, and/or (4) to escape political unrest (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2011; Fuligni, 2005). Parents want their children to thrive in school and reach their full potential. Most want their children to graduate from high school and take advantage of college and career options. They understand the value of educational assets in a global society and expect their children to leverage those assets as they enter the workforce.

Highly successful schools spend time with families when they enroll their children to build trust and establish engagement expectations and methods for families (Kreider, Cape, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Castellón et al., 2015). These effective schools regularly communicate with families and visit with them in their homes to address challenges and opportunities. Newcomer families also need specific information on how to support their children’s learning and development as these families adapt to a new culture and, in many cases, a new language (Castellón et al., 2015).

It is important to remember that not all students arrive with their parents; some arrive alone, some stay with relatives, and others may be in foster homes or with a sponsor.

The Four Stages of Immigrant Parent Involvement

The more schools know about why each newcomer family came to the United States, what their hopes and aspirations are, and how well prepared they are to partner with the school, the better schools are positioned to help these families transition to a new school and community culture. Han and Love (2015) contend that immigrant parents move through four stages of parent involvement: cultural survivor, cultural learner, cultural connector, and cultural leader. The level of involvement depends on the parent’s needs, skills, and interests. The amount of time in the United States does not determine a parent’s stage of involvement, and parents may transition from one stage to another.

Cultural survivors may be recently arrived immigrants. Many will be concerned about securing food and shelter and may not have much time to learn about and navigate the U.S. school system.

¹ U.S. Department of Education. (2004). Parental Involvement: Title I, Part A (Non-regulatory guidance). Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/parentinvguid.doc>

Cultural learners may feel somewhat at ease with the school and want to learn more about what is taught, the school culture, and other aspects of the school. Han and Love contend that cultural learners are more comfortable than cultural survivors with the new school culture and the U.S. education system. “With the help of qualified and trained interpreters and translated documents, parents communicate with schools and learn to navigate the U.S. school system. They feel more comfortable attending workshops in their native language and are likely to participate in parent-teacher conferences with language support” (Han & Love, 2015).

Cultural connectors become familiar with educational terminology, policies, and procedures. They may wish to work with cultural survivors and cultural learners, to encourage them, and to help them understand and engage in school programs and activities that support children and parents.

Cultural leaders often become the “voice” of their ethnic and language community and advocate for parents in the other stages. They may become leaders and participate in trainings.

Han’s Four Stages of Immigrant Involvement

