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# PARTNERING WITH IMMIGRANT PARENTS:

How to Connect Across Language and Culture

Preschool teachers need to build bridges, not walls, with the immigrant parents they serve. And that depends on communication that goes two ways. It's a good thing there is a common ground on which to meet, regardless of a family's culture or the country from which they come. Both parents and teachers want children to learn and like going to school so they can succeed in life. In pursuit of this mutual goal, parents can provide teachers with insights on ways to better meet their children's needs. And parents do want to share this knowledge with their children's teachers. Yet not all parents have the resources, opportunities or access to get engaged in their children's education, and the roadblocks can be especially high for immigrant families. That makes it even harder for teachers and parents to connect across language and culture.

Take Maria, a committed teacher in Boston, who believes in the value of frequent talks with the parents of children in

her class. But it's been tough for her to act on this belief ever since she began serving greater numbers of new arrivals to our nation. Many of the children's parents have recently come from other countries and know very little English. When Maria tries to speak with them, she's not sure they understand. When she invites them into the school, they're reluctant to enter. So, she calls the parents at home but can't get a coherent response from anyone in the household.<sup>1</sup>

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## **I'M SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLE AND CONFUSED ABOUT MY ROLE**

And language isn't the only bar that keeps teachers and immigrant parents apart. This is because communication is tied to culture. So, immigrant parents may relate to preschool staff in ways that teachers find perplexing. In the United States, teachers and parents often work closely together to educate children. But in some countries, parents and teachers tend not to trade thoughts or talk to each other much at all.<sup>2</sup>

For example, Chinese immigrant parents may downplay their own needs to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. When they do talk with teachers, they may appear

reluctant to express their opinions. And the ensuing lack of dialogue leads ECE teachers to mistakenly feel Chinese immigrant parents may not want to participate in their children's education. Similarly, Korean moms may hesitate to ask questions or voice their views out of respect for teachers. Though they do have ideas about their child's education, they seem to keep these opinions to themselves as a sign of respect. And one Korean mom said, "I'm sometimes uncomfortable and confused about my role" when teachers ask for her thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

This mom, like many immigrant parents found it difficult to be critical of teachers. Latino immigrant parents, for example, have a huge sense of reverence for teachers and often address them as "maestra," or master, instead of by name. It's a tradition that led to misunderstandings at Head Start centers in Nashville, Tennessee, and Riverdale, Iowa, where teachers seldom saw the parents and often didn't know much about the diverse communities they served, leading to the rise of cultural walls.<sup>4</sup>

In Riverdale, a Sudanese mom named Fazilah expressed her community's feelings when she described a conflict, she'd had with her daughter's preschool director. The child had been born in Sudan, as she told her class one day, and she was upset when the director corrected her by saying she was born in the U.S. Fazilah was upset, too, when she heard what had taken place. Like many immigrant parents, she didn't want her child

to forget the family's traditions and roots. So, Fazilah met with the director to explain her daughter's dual sense of identity.<sup>5</sup> And she did the right thing by speaking out. Both teachers and parents need to know something about one another if they are to be effective partners in helping young children progress.

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## THE TEACHER ALSO HAS TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO SPEAK WITH ME

When teachers think of parents as partners, they try to bring the parents' knowledge into the classroom as much as they can. Yet in interviews with Latino immigrant parents, the complaint often came up that teachers have a one-way relationship with them and try to keep them away from the school. In California, a

mom named Mariana shared her frustration that many teachers communicated with her only through email, a practice she saw as "a wall" to shut her out. And she felt especially let down after approaching a teacher at pick-up time to discuss her daughter's tendency

to chatter during instruction. When the teacher told Mariana she had to make an appointment, Mariana felt belittled. "If that's the way it is, the teacher also has to make an appointment if she wants to speak with me," Mariana protested.<sup>6</sup>

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And teachers also have concerns about immigrant parents being closed off. For example, Mary, a seasoned teacher of Mexican immigrant children, had to coax a parent into conversation, as she recalled. “I have cared for several of her children and been very close to them,” Mary recalled. Still the mom didn’t appear happy when Mary tried to talk to her about her youngest girl. “This mom always seems like she’s in a hurry, as if she’s saying let’s get this over with,” Mary recalled. Still, she persisted. “And once we’ve started talking about how her child does this or that, she seemed to calm down and become more involved. When I asked if there was anything else she wanted to chat about, her initial answer was ‘no.’ Then, she said, ‘Well, yeah, I do want to talk about this issue I’m having with my youngest daughter.’ And soon she began to relax and go into more detail. So, I was finally able to establish a good relationship with her.”<sup>7</sup>

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## IT’S HARDER WHEN YOU DON’T SPEAK THE LANGUAGE

Face-to-face communication like this definitely works better than just sending notes home, according to Erica, a first-generation American and teacher for six years. “When we talk in person, we can ask parents if they understand so we can discuss issues in more detail.” And Erica’s ability to speak Spanish really helped, according to studies of Mexican American parents and discussions with other teachers. In one focus group, a teacher named Ariana described how families lit up when they saw she could speak Spanish. “So, I think more bilingual staff is needed,” Erica said, and a

teacher named Olga agreed. “When I talk to parents,” she said, “I feel like they have more trust in us because they know who we are and that we know their language.”<sup>8</sup>

Naturally, “it’s harder when you don’t speak Spanish,” as a first-year teacher named Cindy pointed out. But English-speaking teachers can level the walls of language by making eye contact, smiling, nodding, using gestures, learning simple phrases in the parents’ language to show they are trying. And they should take these steps even if they have a native speaker on hand to help them out, according to a teacher named Naomi. “When I have a translator with me, I still always look at the family. I’ll glance over at the translator and make sure that they’re catching what I’m saying, but I’ll focus on the family. And I always shake their hands, tell them thank you, and try to use any kind of welcoming or encouraging words that I can.”<sup>9</sup>

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## MY PARENTS NEVER ATTENDED PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

Strategies like these also helped a New York City preschool teacher named Seung during her eight years working with a wide range of immigrant families from around the world: China, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Guyana, Haiti, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Russia. Like many of the children she served, she had grown up in an immigrant household, so she knew the issues their parents faced and that made her anxious when she had to meet with them in person.<sup>10</sup>



**And when the parents come to your preschool, harness the power of pictures to touch hearts, as Seung did. Pictures can speak volumes to put parents at ease and show them what the children are doing at school. Take pictures of your children's daily activities and post a visual classroom schedule.**

"It was often a daunting task for me," she said, "to plan parent-teacher conferences several times a year because I was nervous that none of the parents would show up. My own parents never attended parent-teacher conferences since Sunday was their only day off from work. I knew this was a common issue for immigrant families, and that made me concerned. Another reason I was nervous was that I knew many of the parents didn't speak English and I had to figure out ways to communicate with them in case they did show up."<sup>11</sup>

Yet Seung managed to get around this roadblock, as she explained. "One of the things I purposefully shared with my students' parents was pictures of their children in the classroom." And this visual aid brought everyone together. "We talked, laughed, and cried as we continued our conversations about the strengths and

needs of the children. Although we spoke different languages, came from different countries, and had different skin colors, we shared common experiences and interests: the children and living in the U.S. as immigrants. I realized then when hearts communicate there are no barriers, and it is possible to have productive and meaningful conferences with parents of all backgrounds."<sup>12</sup>

And there are some steps teachers can take to lower the barrier of language. Learning a few simple words in the language parents speak can go a long way to making them feel more at ease. You can arrange to have school documents translated for them. You can have events in which English is not required, such as a potluck dinner where parents bring traditional dishes from their countries, or the children give performances of song and dance. You can

connect with community organizations that offer interpretation services or provide ESOL classes. You can make home visits to learn more about the children and show parents how much you want to partner with them. You can also hold an open house at your preschool to provide parents with information about community services they might need.<sup>13</sup>

And when the parents come to your preschool, harness the power of pictures to touch hearts, as Seung did. Pictures can speak volumes to put parents at ease and show them what the children are doing at school. Take pictures of your children's daily activities and post a visual classroom schedule. Give the parents a school tour. Label classrooms by using pictures of animals. Put portraits of teachers and staff at the entrance to the school to introduce the staff.<sup>14</sup>

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## THE VALUE OF NONVERBAL CUES

Facial expressions make an impact, as they do in live exchanges. All communication is not through language, and nonverbal channels of communication are socially constructed. Depending on the culture, eye contact, for instance, can say diverse things about power and status, persuade and affect dynamics between people in different ways. For example, in western culture, direct eye contact imparts interest and attention. Meanwhile, looking down signals respect among other cultures.

And in some communities, it is not customary to make direct eye contact.<sup>15</sup>

This is because eye contact is not a social convention in many cultures. Teachers might misread their restraint as avoidance or lack of interest if they don't know about these cultural nuances of communication. So, cultural training is a must for teachers to pick up on these subtle, nonverbal cues.

In addition, teachers should be aware that body language matters, especially when parents don't understand your words. For example, standing side by side with someone indicates cooperation while behaviors like fidgeting, leaning or standing too far away can block communication. So, teachers can use body language to convey their interest and they can also read parents' body language to determine how they feel about what's being said. Doing so depends on self-monitoring skills in which teachers closely observe the parents' behavior and change their own in response.<sup>16</sup>

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## MAKING PARENTS FEEL AT HOME

Small physical gestures really make a difference when parents come to a preschool classroom. The impact of acknowledging families when they enter the room might seem obvious to seasoned early childhood teachers, but immigrant parents have said this was one of the main

things that made them feel welcome in a classroom. When teachers say hello to parents, smile and nod as they come into the room and then approach them right away, parents feel at home. And opening a classroom so parents can come to visit or volunteer during the school day makes it possible for more parents to get involved. This is especially important for immigrant parents whose jobs may make it hard for them to set up an appointment or attend a parent-teacher conference. Still, the parents might be curious about what their child's classroom looks like and how early learning takes place in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Requiring parents to schedule classroom visits may deter them from visiting if they suddenly have a day free, a longer break than usual or some unexpected free time. And teachers shouldn't fear that having parents on hand will make the classroom chaotic. Instead, children tend to quickly accept their parents' presence, and it has the advantage of making the kids feel that parents care about their education. So, teachers should start the school year by telling immigrant parents they are welcome any time and then show it when they do arrive.<sup>18</sup>

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## ADMITTING YOU DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS

Parents' involvement and input matters though trained educators, like those who earn a Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™, have a strong understanding of how children develop. They also acknowledge that parents are their child's first teacher and know more about the child than anyone else. So, the

children of immigrant parents stand to lose if teachers don't take advantage of parents' knowledge by building the strong, two-way communication that is essential to build effective partnerships. And that depends on teachers admitting that they don't have all the answers, the Council points out in *Essentials for Working with Young Children*.

"Parents," as *Essentials* explains, "do not feel like partners in the relationship when staff members see themselves as having all the knowledge and insight about children and view parents as lacking all such knowledge. In reciprocal relationships between practitioners and families, there is mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals. Practitioners work in collaborative partnerships with families, establishing and maintaining regular, two-way communication."<sup>19</sup>

And that means listening to families, according to a Head Start teacher who works closely with immigrant parents in her classroom. She never assumes she fully understands a family, but instead seeks relationships that help her become the best teacher possible for the children in her classroom. "I think it makes a difference," she says, "when we try to get to know the family because, regardless of the culture, sometimes we don't understand what is happening with a child. We try to build a relationship with the parents because knowing and talking with them may be the lost link, the piece of the puzzle that is missing."<sup>20</sup> So, it's important for teachers to listen carefully to immigrant parents, take their ideas to heart and see them as experts on their own children.

When teachers work hard at building bonds with immigrant parents, they can better serve the young immigrant children in their classrooms. And they also serve the broader, countrywide goal of building inclusion. That's because preschool is often the first place where immigrant parents have close contact with their new nation.<sup>21</sup> It's also a place where they can begin enriching our country with their culture and talents. Even if parents don't speak English, they can still be valuable assets in a classroom. They can read a book to the class in their native language, lead children in a cooking, dancing or art class, and bring in pictures from their homeland to show to the students.

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## WHAT A NATIONAL MELTING POT MEANS

So how can teachers encourage the parents to get involved? For answers, let's peek in at a potluck dinner Maria held at her preschool classroom in Boston. The parents line up in front of a scrumptious array of dishes from diverse nations. They smile and laugh while looking at pictures of their children around the classroom. Some parents use the basic English

they've learned in an adult ESOL class to communicate with other parents. Others look over a document about school procedures that Maria had translated for them. Using an interpreter from a local college, Maria asks one dad if he could come and teach art classes, a suggestion to which he gladly agrees. She schedules home visits with other parents to learn more about their children. She also shows them new books the center has purchased in their native languages and asks them if they can come to read a story.<sup>22</sup>

The parents are excited to be there. Maria is, too, since she knows how much these parents can contribute to her students' growth. And as Maria and the parents connect across language and culture, they merge in a melting pot warmed by shared interest in the children. This kind of inclusion is one of our nation's ideals. And reaching it demands two-way communication, based on common concerns. Our teachers can play a key role in bringing folks together since they serve a group we all care about no matter the country from which we come. Love for young children crosses borders and can tear down the walls that keep many immigrant parents apart.

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