



ERIC Identifier: ED333619

Publication Date: 1991-05-00

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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children Reston VA.

Communicating with Culturally Diverse Parents of Exceptional Children. ERIC Digest #E497.

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Teachers and other professionals providing education-related services to exceptional children from different cultural backgrounds need to be aware of unique perspectives or communication styles common to those cultures. The ways people deal with feelings--especially disappointment, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, and anger--vary considerably, and often it is not easy to discern how parents are reacting to the realization that their child has a disability. It is especially important to help parents who have been outside the mainstream of U.S. education understand the educational options available. To do this, professionals need to be sensitive to the different values, experiences, and beliefs that may be held by members of various cultural and ethnic groups toward special education.

USE LANGUAGE PARENTS CAN UNDERSTAND AND USE SENSITIVITY IN COMMUNICATING.

To facilitate communication, educators should use the following guidelines:

- * Send messages home in the parent's native language.
- * Use an appropriate reading level.
- * Listen to messages being returned.

Courtesy, sincerity, and ample opportunity and time to convey concerns can promote communication with and participation by parents from different cultural backgrounds (Johnson & Ramirez, 1987). During meetings it is important to provide ample opportunity for parents to respond without interrupting. If a parent is formulating a response and has not expressed himself or herself quickly, this delay should not be viewed as a lack of interest in responding. Educators need to listen with empathy and realize that parents can change from feelings of trust to skepticism or curiosity as their understanding of programs and policies increases. It is important to realize that this reaction is normal and that parents may feel hostile or desperate as they attempt to sort out facts from their fundamental beliefs about education.

In communicating with families from different cultural groups, educators should keep in mind their diverse cultural styles. There is no one set of characteristics that can be ascribed to all members of any ethnic group. Instead, the cultural traits of individuals range from those traditionally attributed to the ethnic group to those that are descriptive of a person who has been totally assimilated into the majority culture (Carter & Segura, 1979). Unfortunately, much of the literature describing individuals from minority groups reinforces existing stereotypes. This digest offers some observations about different cultural styles that should be considered cautiously in communications with families of differing cultural backgrounds (Cloud & Landurand, 1988; Johnson & Ramirez, 1987; Taylor, 1989).

Sharing Space. People from different cultures use, value, and share space differently. In some cultures it is considered appropriate for people to stand very close to each other while talking, whereas in other cultures people like to keep farther apart. For example, Hispanics often view Americans as being distant because they prefer more space between speakers. On the other hand, Americans often view individuals who come too close as pushy or invading their private space.

Touching. Rules for touching others vary from culture to culture. In Hispanic and other Latin cultures, two people engaged in conversation are often observed touching and individuals usually embrace when greeting each other. In other cultures, people are more restrained in their greetings. In the Asian/Vietnamese cultures, for example, it is not customary to shake hands with individuals of the opposite sex.

Eye Contact. Among African Americans it is customary for the listener to avert the eyes, whereas Euro-Americans prefer to make direct eye contact while listening. Among Hispanics, avoidance of direct eye contact is sometimes seen as a sign of attentiveness and respect, while sustained direct eye contact may be interpreted as a challenge to authority.

Time Ordering of Interactions. The maxim "business before pleasure" reflects the "one activity at a time" mindset of U.S. mainstream culture. Some cultures, however, are polychronic, that is, people typically handle several activities at the same time. Before getting down to business, Hispanics generally exchange lengthy greetings, pleasantries, and talk of things unrelated to the business at hand. Social interactions may continue to be interwoven throughout the conversation.

PROVIDE PARENTS WITH INFORMATION.

Much of the need for information can be satisfied through regularly scheduled meetings, conferences, and planning sessions for a child's individualized education program (IEP). Educators may assume that their own familiarity with public policy is shared by parents of children with disabilities. Usually, this is not the case. Most parents of culturally diverse children with disabilities need help in understanding the basic tenets of the law, including their own rights and responsibilities.

SUPPORT PARENTS AS THEY LEARN HOW TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SYSTEM.

Schools must make a sincere commitment to consider parents as partners in their children's education. Professionals who are attempting to work and communicate with parents of children with disabilities should be prepared to support the parents' rights and responsibilities. In essence, professionals should adopt the role of advocate. Parents from culturally diverse backgrounds should be encouraged to join parent organizations and share their cultural points of view.

Educators and other professionals should recognize parents' needs for the following:

- * Assurance that they should not feel guilty about their child's disability.
- * Acceptance of their feelings without labeling.
- * Acceptance of them as people, rather than as a category.
- * Help in seeing the positive aspects of the future.
- * Recognition of what a big job it is to raise a child with disabilities and help in finding programs, services, and financial resources to make it possible for them to do the job with dignity.

Using these guidelines for communication, teachers and other professionals can assist parents of culturally diverse children with disabilities not only to combat feelings of isolation, but also to achieve a sense of belonging.

ENCOURAGE PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AT HOME.

A growing body of research evidence suggests that important benefits are gained by school-aged children when their parents provide support, encouragement, and direct instruction at home and when home-school communication is active. Children who receive parental help read much better than children who do not. Even instruction by highly competent specialists at school does not produce gains comparable to those obtained when students are tutored by their parents at home (Hewison & Tizard, 1980). Even illiterate parents can promote the acquisition of reading skills by motivating their children, providing an environment that promotes the acquisition of literacy skills, providing comparative and contrasting cultural information, asking the children to read to them, and encouraging verbal interaction about written material.

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Title: Communicating with Culturally Diverse Parents of Exceptional Children. ERIC Digest #E497.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Target Audience: Practitioners

Available From: Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, VA 22091-1589 (\$1.00 each, minimum order \$5.00).

Descriptors: Cultural Awareness, Cultural Differences, Disabilities, Elementary Secondary Education, Interpersonal Communication, Language Handicaps, Limited English Speaking, Parent Participation, Parent Teacher Cooperation, Teacher Role

Identifiers: ERIC Digests

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