The Many Kinds of Family Structures in Our Communities
(some respectful terms for families - and a few books to make all families visible!)
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Based on the author’s work with Louise Derman-Sparks
from Anti-bias Education for Children and Ourselves, NAEYC 2009

Children grow up in many different structures of families and, at different times in their lives, their family structure may change. For young children, the family in which they live is the “normal” family. It is when children enter group programs outside of their homes that they discover that there are many kinds of families and that the important adults in those programs may or may not think of the child’s family as “normal” or acceptable.

One of the most important tasks for early childhood educators is to treat each child’s family with respect and help each child feel proud and strong about their family. It is important to learn about the many structures of families and to realize that different families may have quite different issues, needs, strengths and values. The following terms may help you to think carefully and respectfully about each family. These terms are not exclusive – and several terms may apply to any family at the same time. It is important to find out which term(s) each family uses to name itself, and for you to use the terms that the family chooses.

Adoptive family: A family where one or more of the children has been adopted. Any structure of family may also be an adoptive family. Trans-racial adoptive family: A family where the adopted child is of a different racial identity group than the parents.

- Sometimes children (as well as adults) use the term “real parents” instead of “birth parents”. Be clear that the adoptive parents are the real parents because they are raising the child. Intervene if other children tease an adopted child with comments such as “That isn’t your real mommy”. Do not automatically assume that any problems a child may be having are due to adoption.
- Some wonderful books: Pablo’s Tree, Pat Mora; Dear Child, John Farrell; Happy Adoption Day, John McCutcheon; Jin Woo, Eve Bunting; Bringing Asha Home, Uma Krishnaswami, Motherbridge of Love, Xinan

Bi-racial or multi-racial family: A family where the parents are members of different racial identity groups.

- Children in these families are not “half and half”, nor do they have to choose one identity over another. Each child is fully who they are. Find out what terms the family uses to describe their various racial identities. As racial identity remains one of the most contentious and difficult issues in the United States, be prepared to listen especially carefully and respectfully to what the family believes and what they want their child to value about her/his identity.
- Some wonderful books: Black is Brown is Tan, Arnold Adoff; How My Parents Learned to Eat in America, Ina Friedman; Mixed, Kim Fullback; Two Mrs. Gibsons, Daryl Wells; Waiting for Baby, Rachel Fuller

Blended family: A family that consists of members from two (or more) previous families.

- Families may use a variety of terms for the various family members (Step Dad, Gary, Poppop, etc.) and have varying connections with extended family members. Encourage children to show all of their family in drawings and to make gifts for everyone (if you do that kind of activity). Be clear that all family members are “real” and that all the relationships are important to the child.
- Some wonderful books: Totally Uncool, Chris Monroe; When We Married Gary, Anna Heines
"Broken home": A highly derogatory, hurtful term used to describe the homes of children from divorced families.
- Be clear that there is no such thing as a broken family. Each family form is what it is and is a real family!

Co-custody family (joint custody family): An arrangement where divorced parents both have legal responsibility for their children. Children may alternate living with each parent or live with one and have visitation with the other.
- Find out right away which parent is responsible for the child on what days, who picks up child, etc.
- Encourage children to acknowledge both homes—do not ask them to choose.
- Some wonderful books: Fred Stays With Me, Tricia Tusa; Two Homes, Claire Masurel; Dinosaur’s Divorce, Marc Brown; It’s Not Your Fault Koko Bear.

Conditionally separated families: A family member is separated from the rest of the family. This may be due to employment far away, military service, incarceration, hospitalization. They remain significant members of the family.
- Support the child to deal with a difficult emotional time. You can help the child to stay connected by making drawings, dictating letters or stories about favorite activities at school, taking photos about a favorite activity, creating a special calendar that marks off the days until the family will be reunited.
- Some wonderful books: Mama Loves Me From Away, Pat Brisson (incarceration); Raymond’s Perfect Gift, Suling Wang (hospitalization); Friday Night is Papa Night, Emily A McCully (employment); A Paper Hug, Stephanie Skolmoski (military deployment); You Go Away, Dorothy Corey (separation and return).

Extended family: A family where Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, play major roles in the children’s upbringing. This may or may not include those relatives living with the children. This family may be in addition to the child’s parents or instead of the child’s parents.
- Be sure to include in school invitations/conferences all the people in an extended family who play major socialization roles. Intervene if others deny the central role of these relatives, for example if a child says “Mama puts you to bed—not your Auntie!” Be very aware that Grandparents may have as much voice in decisions as parents, and cousins may be as close as siblings.
- Some wonderful books: So Much, Trish Oxenbury; Bigmama’s, Donald Crews; The Relatives Came, Cynthia Rylant; Grandma Hekmet Remembers, Ann Morris; Our Granny, Margaret Wilde

Foster family: A family where one or more of the children is legally a temporary member of the household. This “temporary” period may be as short as a few days or as long as the child’s entire childhood. Kinship care families are foster families where there is a legal arrangement for the child to be cared for by relatives of one of the parents.
- Use whatever terminology the child uses about their foster parents (they may call them Mom or Dad or they may use their first names or may call them Mama 2 and Papa 2, etc). Check with the foster parents about what they have told the child about the absent family and the likelihood of reuniting. If the original parents are able to visit, and wish to come to the school, make them welcome. Never ask a child to choose who is most important to them.
- Some wonderful books: Kids Need to Be Safe, Julie Nelson; Mama One Mama Two, Ruth Bornstein; Stevie, John Steptoe,

Gay or Lesbian family: A family where one or both of the parents’ sexual orientation is gay or lesbian. This may be a two-parent family, an adoptive family, a single parent family or an extended family.
- In many parts of the United States these families may not be allowed full legal rights to their children, and in most parts of the country they face significant social prejudice. It is up to the Early Childhood professionals to prove that they are safe people for the families to talk with. No one but the members of the family has the right to "out" a family (reveal their sexual orientation) to anyone else. Find out what terms the child uses to describe her/his parents (Daddy & Pops, Mama Jan & Mama Lisa, etc.). Be sure that all letters, forms, invitations, etc. use language that makes clear that these families are welcome.
- Some wonderful books: A Tale of Two Daddies, Vanita Oelschlager; Mommy, Mama & Me, Leslea Neuman; Best Best Colors, Eric Hoffman; And Tango Makes Three, Justin Richardson
Immigrant family: A family where the parents have immigrated to the United States as adults. Their children may or may not be immigrants. Some family members may continue to live in the country of origin, but still be significant figures in the life of the child. (See Trans-national families below.)

- Each of these families bring with them a set of culturally based behaviors for raising their precious children. And each of these families is continually navigating between what makes sense in their country of origin, and what is needed in their new country. ECE programs must take special care to strengthen the bonds between the child and the family and not set up a “right or wrong” way for things to be done. Supporting the child’s home language (the child’s mother tongue) is as essential for the child’s survival as is supporting the child as an English language learner. While language is the most obvious of the differences for ECE staff to manage, cultural beliefs and behaviors are equally important.

- Some wonderful books: Dear June, Soyoung Pak; A Day’s Work, Eve Bunting; My Name is Sangooal, K.L. Williams; Lights for Gita, Rachana Gilmore; Tonio’s Cat, Mary Calhoun;

Migrant family: A family that moves regularly to places where they have employment. The most common form of migrant family is farm workers who move with the crop seasons. Children may have a relatively stable community of people who move at the same time - or the family may know no one in each new setting. Military families may also lead a migrant life, with frequent relocation, often on short notice.

- Document what the child does in your program for the families to take with them to new programs. Provide pictures that the child can take with them to remember friends, teachers, activities. Assume it may take longer for the child and the family to settle in to your program and “take root”.

- Some wonderful books: Amelia’s Road, Linda Jacobs Altman; Migrant, Maxine Trottier; Potato, Kate Lied; Apple Picking Time, Michelle Slawson; Just One More Story, Jennifer Brotschy

Nuclear family: A family consisting of a married man & woman and their biological children.

- This family form is the one most reinforced in the dominant society. The main issue for children is to help them understand that their two-parent, heterosexual family is a fine family, and is one kind among many other kinds of families. It is essential that early childhood teachers do not assume that just because a family has a nuclear structure, they do not need support and connection.

- Some wonderful books: Goodbye Mousie, Robie H. Harris; Too Many Tamales, Gary Soto; Hairs/Pelitos, Sandra Cisneros; Daishiki, Gaylia Taylor; Car Washing Street, Denise Lewis Patrick

Single parent family: This can be either a father or a mother who is singly responsible for the raising of a child. The child can be by birth or adoption. They may be a single parent by choice or by life circumstances. The other parent may have been part of the family at one time or not at all.

- Find out what other supports the single parent has in their life, and which other people play a significant role in the child’s life. It may be particularly significant for this type of family that the early childhood program build a caring community of parents.

- Some wonderful books: A Father Like That, Charlotte Zolotow; Good Job Little Bear, Martin Waddell; Where’s Chimpy?, Bernice Raby, The Paper Crane, Molly Bang; Hill, Ann Herbert Scott; You and Me and Home Sweet Home, Geroge Ella Lyon; Man’s Work, Annie Kubler
Transnational family: These families live in more than one country. They may spend part of each year in their country of origin returning to the U.S. on a regular basis. The child may spend time being cared for by different family members in each country.

- **Culture clash may be a very difficult issue for these families as they work to have their children be “at home” in both places. Be sure to find out the words the child uses for their various family members in both countries and what (if any) kinds of group care the child experiences.**
- **Some wonderful books:** *Chavez's Memories*, Maria Isobel Delgado; *Amber's Other Grandparents*, Peter Bonnici; *Going Home*, Eve Bunting; *Sitti's Secret*, Naomi Shihab Nye; *My Dadima Wears a Sari*, Kashmira Sheth

Working Class or Poverty Class family: For many families, economic circumstances impact every decision and every day of their lives. Children in these families rarely find their experiences reflected in children's books, and, in media, only reflected in negative ways. Buying clothes second hand, going to Laundromats, not having new toys or other "hot trend" products, going to clinics, traveling by bus, living homeless, are some of the experiences children and their families may have to manage and live with day by day.

- **ECE staff must be very careful not to equate the struggles these families face with "bad" parenting.** Coming late to school is often the result of having to use unreliable public transportation or unrepaired cars. Concern over clean clothes may be connected to the difficulties and costs of using Laundromats. Getting child care to attend meetings, or getting permission to miss work may make it difficult for them to participate. Be sure not to use food for art projects—a painful and insulting experience for families where food is a source of worry and is not to be wasted. Avoid the insulting phrase "lower class". Look for books that celebrate the important work family members do.
- **Some wonderful books:** *By the Dawn's Early Light*, Karen Ackerman; *Ragsale*, Artie Baker; *Mama Bear*, Chyng Feng Sun; *The Big Enough Helper*, Nancy Hall; *A Chair for My Mother*, Vera Williams; *Friday Night is Papa Night*, Ruth Sonneberg; *Spuds*, Karen Hesse

Families Coping with Disabilities: Any of the above types of family structures may also have members who have disabilities—some visible, some not. Whatever other issues they may have, there is always the addition of having to continually adjust and shift to meet the needs of the person with the disability. For most of these families, the search for resources is a major and on-going struggle. Although there are some good books available which feature children with disabilities, it is harder to find those with parents.

- **Adopting our classrooms and instruction for the inclusion of children with disabilities is a requirement for every program. It is also crucial that we adapt for the adults in a family and find ways of making their inclusion natural and expected. While these families often have special needs, they are not helped by pity nor by pretending they do not need accommodation. It is important for the ECE staff to openly discuss the disability with the family, find out what words the child has for describing the specifics, use the family's terminology in the classroom. The family itself is the expert on what will be most helpful. Take your lead from their understanding.**
- **Some wonderful books:** *No Fair to Tigers*, Eric Hoffman; *Susan Laughs*, Jeannie Willis; *Where's Chimp?, Berniece Rabe, A Special Trade*, Sally Wittner; *Mama Zooms*, Jane Cowen-Fletcher; *Now One Foot Now the Other*, Tommy dePaola

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This handout from "That's My Family", a workshop by Christina Lopez Morgan and Julie Olsen Edwards at CAEYC State Conference, March 17, 2012, San Diego, California
Some Helpful (we hope) Book Information

How do I find quality children’s books about specific family structures and social identities?

- One good source is the database for the Children’s Peace and Anti-Bias Library at www.childpeacebooks.org. This database lets you look up high quality books by family type, by age appropriateness, by ethnicity or racial identity or economic class, as well as by special topics.
- Talk to book sellers and librarians. Most of them keep up to date on what is available and if they know you are looking for books with certain categories of families they will watch for them and let you know.
- Go on line and look up sites related to the specific family type you are hoping to support and make visible. For example you could look up “Children’s books about foster families” or “Migrant families children’s books”. Warning: be wary of the age recommendations – they often presume any picture book must age appropriate for pre-schoolers.

How can I tell if the book is stereotype free and respectful if I am not a member of the social group/family structure I am interested in?

- Show the book you are considering to a staff member or family member who is part of the social group/family structure you want to celebrate. Ask them what they think of the book.
- Think about the stereotypes about a family type you have heard or seen on films. Make a short list and ask other people in your program to add to it. Then – avoid those stereotypes!
- Sometimes stereotypes are also true or partially true. For example there are many Mexican American families who work as farm laborers and it is important to give visibility to those families. However many Mexican American families work at a wide variety of jobs, working class, middle class and professional. Given the stereotype (Mexicans are migrant farm workers), it is essential to also have books (such as “Too Many Tamales” or “Hil” or “Hairs”) which contradict the stereotype.

Where do I find books?

- Our first choice is always your local public library. Usually, if they are not carrying a specific book they will try to get it for you on inter-library loan. Librarians are also a great source for finding other books for you.
- If you are buying books, start at your local independent book store. If they don’t carry the book they will order it for you. Their children’s book buyers are very interested in community needs and are usually up to date on what is available. Many of the local independents give special discounts to teachers.
- If you are going to order on-line, we recommend looking up the book by title, rather than going to Amazon. Frequently you can purchase directly from the publisher, which encourages publishers to keep the book in print, to keep producing books about a broad spectrum of families, and to be open to printing new ones on the topics you care about. (Maybe even a book you have written some day???)

What if the book is out of print?

The bad news is that children’s books go out of print very, very quickly. Sadly, most publishers are focused on books that they can produce with commercial product lines (toys, clothes, etc.). This means many important books about the children we serve and their families are only kept in print briefly - if they get published at all.


Where do I get the money to buy books?

- Books are the easiest things to get money for. Almost everyone understands books are important for young children’s development and success in life, and most will give your program money for books.
- Large grants are nice, but not necessary. Staff and families can ask their banks, grocery stores, employers, religious institutions, social groups, etc. to contribute to buy a book. Small contributions go a long way with books.
- Many organizations (e.g. Rotary, University Women’s Clubs, etc.) will contribute for books even if that is not the focus of their giving.
- Make up a book plate that says “This book is a gift from...” and tell donors their name will appear in the book forever. Or if they prefer, the book can be given in honor of someone else. (For example, Grandparents will often contribute a book that honors a grandchild’s birthday).
- You can either ask for donations and you purchase the books, or can come up with a list of books and let the donors chose or buy the books themselves.
- Always, always send a thank you note right away. It’s nice to include a snapshot of a child reading the book!