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Family Engagement

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Creating a Welcoming Early Childhood Program for LGBTQIA2S+ Families

Early childhood programs can partner with parents and families to create safe and nurturing environments for children. Safe environments ensure equality, respect, and dignity for parents, families, and staff members, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, or gender expression. Explore this resource to learn more about partnering with LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families in your early childhood program.

LGBTQIA2S+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, or additional sexual orientations and gender identities that are not heterosexual or cisgender.

How to Partner with LGBTQIA2S+ Families

Start with strengths.

Enable meaningful partnerships by starting with attitudes and practices that focus on families' strengths. Remember, all families have similarities and differences. Like others, LGBTQIA2S+ parents have goals, dreams, and concerns about their children and families.

Get to know your LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families and recognize each family is unique.

Ask the same kinds of questions you ask other families, as well as some more specific questions, such as:

- What name does your child call you? (e.g., Papa or Daddy)
- How would you like us to refer to you when talking with your child?
- How would you like me to describe your family to others (e.g., children or adults)?
- How would you like me to respond to questions about your family?

Understand LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families have individual preferences about the openness of their family.

Some parents are private. They may not feel safe or comfortable sharing details about their home life or family relationships. LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families also may be "out" in one aspect of their lives but not in others. The phrase "being out" means a person has openly shared that they self-identify as LGBTQIA2S+. For example, someone who is "out" to friends and family may not be "out" at work. This means they may not be comfortable with you sharing they are LGBTQIA2S+ with others without their permission.

When and how to come out is a personal decision and is different for everyone.

Create a welcoming environment for LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families.

- Make intake, enrollment, and other program forms reflect language welcoming to all kinds of families. For example, change the spaces that request the names of "father" and "mother" to "parent," "guardian," or "parent/guardian."
- In written communications, address families using inclusive phrases such as "Dear parents and guardians," or "Dear families."
- Make diverse images more visible in your program — consider pictures on the walls and photos in marketing brochures. Look for opportunities to share images of all kinds of families, including LGBTQIA2S+ parents and their children. Have inclusive children's books available and read them to the class.
- Put signs or posters on the walls to welcome families and their children. For example, signs could say, "We welcome all families and children!" or "All families welcome here!" This signals to parents that you are accepting of diversity.
- Invite LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families to participate in program activities, especially if you sense they seem uncomfortable.

Develop an affirming and welcoming environment for all children.

Listen for and intervene in hurtful or biased comments from children, whether about a child's family, skin color, age, gender, or another personal characteristic. Help children learn to speak up for themselves and for others. Support children to feel proud of themselves and their families. Make your program a safe space where children can come to you if they feel hurt or confused about another child's comments.

Offer professional development activities that help staff learn more about LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families.

- Provide sensitivity and cultural awareness training about topics relevant to working with LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families. Ensure those topics are included in other diversity trainings and staff development sessions.
- Train staff about what they can do when colleagues or parents use derogatory language or act in a discriminatory manner toward LGBTQIA2S+ parents, families, or staff members. For example, should they speak up in the moment, or wait and talk in private later? Should they talk with a supervisor about it, or speak directly with the staff member or parent who made the remark?
- Budget funds for staff to attend conferences about topics related to working with LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families.

Be ready to answer questions from children about LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families.

Children are curious and want to know about everything they see and hear. They may have questions such as, "Why does my friend have two moms?" You could say, "She has two moms who love each other and who love and take care of her, just like your grandma takes care of you."

They might ask, "Where is Isaac's mom?" while pointing at Isaac's two dads. You could say, "Isaac has two dads instead of a mom and a dad. That's who is in his family. A family can be made up of many different people." Keep your answers simple and straightforward.

In a group of children, you can invite discussion about different kinds of families and the things families have in common. Focus on love, relationships, and caregiving. For example, "Let's talk about who takes care of us at home."

Practice addressing discomfort about LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families in your program.

Prepare in advance a response to use if you hear adults saying insensitive things. You could say, "It seems you are uncomfortable with having a family with LGBTQIA2S+ parents in our program. Our goal is to maintain the dignity and safety of all our children and families."

Promote anti-discrimination policies in your program.

LGBTQIA2S+ parents may feel vulnerable in ways others do not because of past or current experiences in their own families and communities. While people may be more visible and accepted in some communities, bias and prejudice still exist.

Some LGBTQIA2S+ parents may withhold information because of fears of discrimination or rejection, of their family but especially of their young child. They also may fear their confidentiality will be breached by staff members.

Be sensitive to the fact LGBTQIA2S+ families have a higher risk of poverty and may have lower access to health care because of bias and laws that, historically, do not recognize LGBTQIA2S+ parents. Parents of color who are LGBTQIA2S+ may have additional challenges related to poverty, bias, and discrimination.

- Ask yourself: "How accepting is my community of LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families?"
- Address diversity in your mission statement and implement an anti-discrimination policy that explicitly includes actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Share your program's confidentiality policy with all families and reiterate it when sensitive conversations arise.

Foster a safe environment in which staff members feel free to ask questions, discuss values, examine bias, and evaluate attitudes.

- Support staff in engaging with all families in a respectful and appropriate way.
- Provide opportunities for staff to reflect as individuals, address concerns and questions with supervisors, and share ideas and strategies with peers.
- Encourage staff's growth by creating a shared agreement about how to discuss challenging topics as a group in a safe and respectful way.
- Create a balance of appropriate training and coaching opportunities to ensure staff have the skills to contribute to an LGBTQIA2S+-welcoming program environment and to work directly with LGBTQIA2S+ parents and families.
- Help staff develop skills to address and be comfortable with experiences that can lead to professional growth and recognizing individual biases, values, or beliefs.

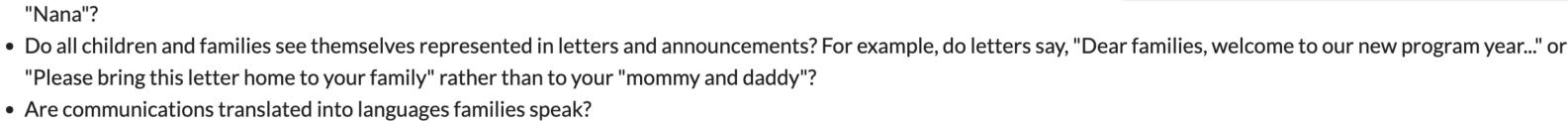**Explore your own beliefs and practices.**

We all have biases, though we may not always want to admit it. Explore your own feelings separately, and when you're ready, talk with a supervisor or a trusted colleague. Remember you can join with each family and become their partner in their child's and family's development.

How to Create a Welcoming Program

One of the first steps to creating a welcoming early childhood program is to assess what you are doing well and identify areas for growth. Providers, teachers, and administrators can use these considerations for self-assessment. They can also be used to begin conversations with staff, parents, and guardians.

Center and Classroom Family Communications

- Are the application and other forms families complete friendly to all families? Do they use language such as parent/parent or parent/guardian rather than mother/father?
- Do you ask families who the important people are in their children's lives and what children call them? For example, if a child has two dads, are they called "Daddy" or "Papi"? If a grandmother is raising a child, is she "Grandma" or "Nana"?
- Do all children and families see themselves represented in letters and announcements? For example, do letters say, "Dear families, welcome to our new program year..." or "Please bring this letter home to your family" rather than to your "mommy and daddy"?
- Are communications translated into languages families speak?

Welcoming Environments

- Are there photos in common areas and in classrooms of families at work and at play? Do they depict the many ways children and families interact with each other and engage with the world?
- Do photos promote inclusive definitions of families? For example, are there photos of adoptive, LGBTQIA2S+, grandparent-headed, and multi-racial families?
- Do images show people representing diverse races and ethnicities, economic status, physical ability, age, and family structure?
- Do posters, children's art, children's book displays, and photos of your real families (including staff) depict the many ways people work, play, and live as families?
- Is there a place to display a "Families Gallery" that features every family (including staff) in your program? Are these photos visible at eye level for children and placed where families can also see them? Are they part of ongoing, day-to-day conversations?

Daily Classroom Activities

Block Area

- Do figures of families and people represent different cultures and families?
- Are there multiple sets of "family" figure dolls so children can select or create a grouping that most looks like their own family?
- Are figures stored in arrangements that allow children to make selections that represent their family structures, rather than in arrangements that may only represent one kind of family (e.g., having a mother, father, child, and baby)?

Dramatic Play Area

- Are there props that encourage multiple ways of playing family or other imaginative play?
- Are children encouraged to use all the different props and dress-up materials?

Circle and Group Times

- Do you talk about different kinds of families?
- Do you address name-calling and hurtful behaviors and teach positive social interactions?
- Do you communicate with children about things they have in common and differences?

Writing Area

- Are there photos and prompts that encourage children to write or tell stories about all kinds of people and families?
- Are children's stories shared with other children in ways that encourage respectful exploration of each other's experiences and ideas?

Art Area

- Are there materials and opportunities for children to express their ideas about themselves, their families, and their experiences?
- Are children encouraged to share their work and ideas with others in ways that invite conversation and exploration?
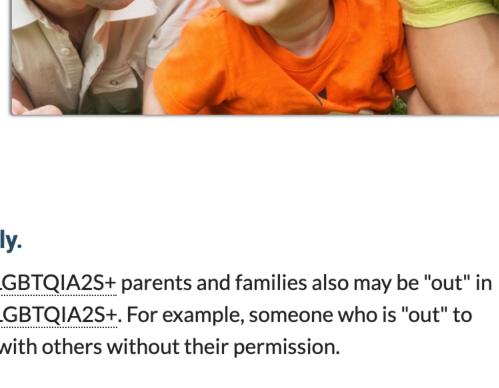
Music Activities

- Is there a thoughtful selection of songs that represent diversity and broaden children's exposure to different kinds of music?
- Can children identify with the people and experiences they sing about? Can they comfortably discover and discuss differences?

Library

- Do the children's books you display and read represent different kinds of families?
- Do books used for discussions allow children to share their own experiences, ask questions, and explore the many ways of being?
- Do you have books that show diverse cultures?
- Are children engaged in making their own books, especially "My Family" books? Are these displayed with other books in the library and sturdy enough to be handled regularly by children?
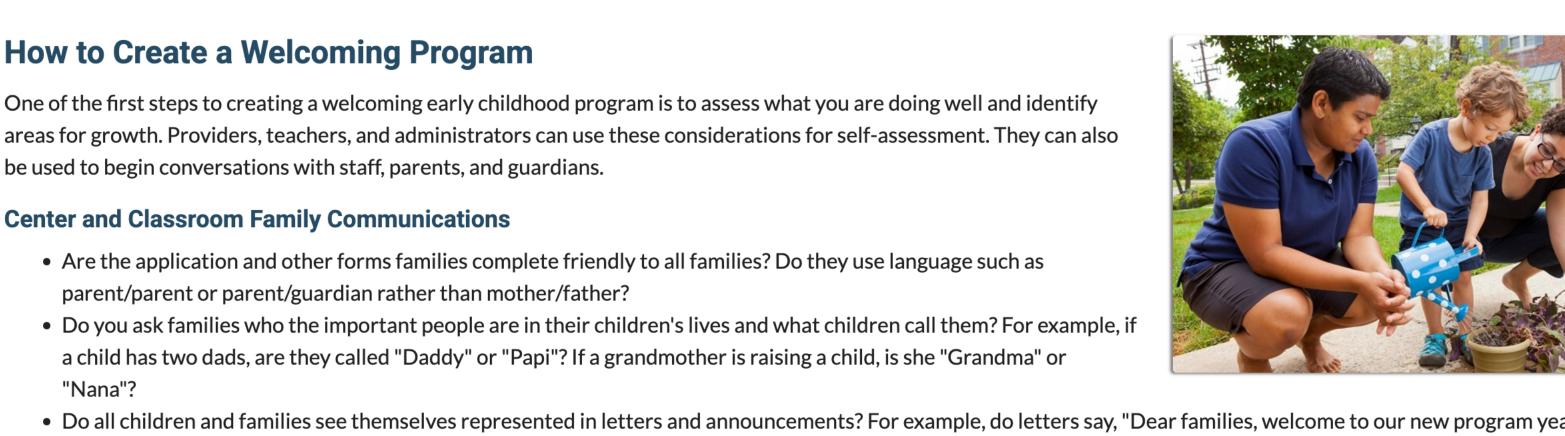
In all that we do with young children, there are opportunities to explore ideas and ask questions. Children have stories to tell every day. 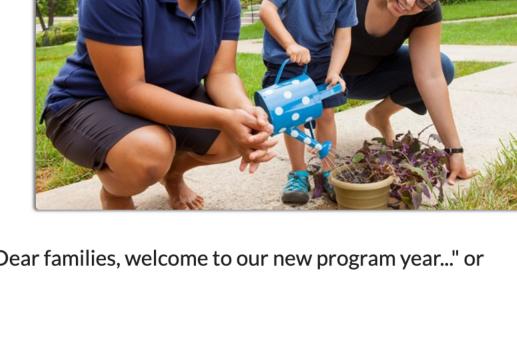Seeing the world through their own lens and through the experiences of others prepares them to live in a diverse world and to see themselves and everyone else as belonging.

Read more:

Relationship-based Practices, Family Engagement

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