

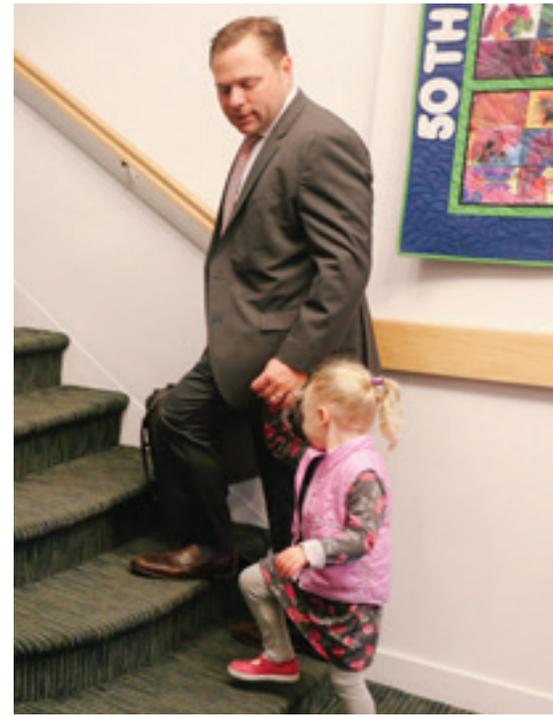
THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY IN OUR CLASSROOMS

By Giuliana de Grazia, Teacher, 3Wam

Almost every day from October through June, at least one child will point to his or her family photo on the wall. "See? That's my family!" or "Look! I see my dad. His name is Angelo," or "Giuls, did you know me and my mom have a special feeling called rainbow love? She gets it when she hugs her mom, my grandma, or when I give her a kiss!" Children look to these pictures when they long for their families during separation. They can see their families when they wander the classroom awaiting the urge to work or play. The pictures are present during drop-off and dismissal, for hellos and goodbyes. And, most importantly, children see their families during our classroom circles, when we build community by talking about kindness, friendship, ourselves, and those we love. Our families, though they say goodbye when the door closes, are actually ever-present in our classrooms.

In *The Power of Guidance: Teaching Social Emotional Skills in Early Childhood Classrooms*, Dan Gartrell writes, "Over the years a mistaken practice in education has been to consider the child in the classroom as separate from the child in the family" (2004, p. 38). Today, research related to anti-bias early childhood education is digging deeper to demonstrate why families are so important to children and what challenges may arise as children begin to make meaning of their families and the families of others. As adults, and as teachers, we have the responsibility to support and guide children in our community as they try to understand other families, their own families, and themselves.

Young children's personal and social identities are directly connected to their families. They understand themselves based on the people they love most, know best, and have



learned everything from. In *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards (2010) write, "Family is central to the life of every child. It is through this earliest relationship that children come to view themselves and others and find their place in the world" (p.112). Not only is it through their families that children make meaning of their world, but each child also begins with the understanding that his or her family represents what all families are. As adults, we know that family structures vary, and we also know that a family structure does not reveal what a family needs or "how well it functions" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 113). Our children, however, are just beginning to learn about how families are full of differences.

One of the beautiful and interesting aspects of family is that it is a concrete and meaningful subject through which children can explore and respect the diversity in our community. Children are curious about how families are composed of different numbers of people, different roles, and different appearances. Children can see that some families live together and some live apart; some families live with grandparents; some families have step-parents and step-siblings; some families are spread around the globe, while others all live within the five boroughs. Children can also see the love, care, and sense of belonging that exists in all families.

It has been interesting to consider what *family* means, to children and to adults. According to Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), "Most children most commonly un-



derstand *family* as ‘the people who live with you’ or ‘the people who take special care of you’” (p. 112). The Boston Children’s Museum Exhibit on Family Diversity shared this definition:

- We may be related by birth, adoption, or invitation.
- We may belong to the same race or we may be of different races.
- We may look like each other or different from each other.
- The important thing is, we belong to each other.
- We care about each other.
- We agree, disagree, love, fight, and work together.
- We belong to each other.

How do you think *family* should be defined for children? What aspects of family do you feel are important to talk about with children? As teachers, we ask ourselves these very questions, and many more. [See Sidebar: Stop and Think: Our Own and Others’ Family Structures] Through conversations and activities about *family*, we can help children learn to respect differences among families, and to cherish the love within families.

In the new WSMS strategic plan, the school set a goal to celebrate and explore our community’s diversity. The family unit is a perfect place to begin; however, like other sensitive topics, teachers are careful to set a strong foundation of understanding and respect first. We recognize that adults and children are sensitive when talking about the differences and uncertainties they may experience within their own families. We also agree that, “Children are hurt if their early childhood community does not validate their family. Because family is such a personal construct, it is critical that teachers allow each child to define his or her family and then support that definition” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p.113). For these reasons, we build curriculum around the idea of *family* and we include everyone.

Before sharing the family photos with the whole class, we read books, do activities, and have conversations about family. For example, we might read *Who’s in a Family?* by Robert Skutch or *The Great Big Book of Families* by Mary Hoffman. We then collect information about what children know about families. In one such conversation this year, comments ranged from “You love your family and you never leave your family or you’ll miss them,” to “They can get mad. They don’t like when me and my sister hang upside down. They say we can break our necks, but that’s not really true,” and “Sometimes we can always be proud in my family and



smile!” We also have specific conversations about who is in a family. Again, children share different ideas:

- “I have one cousin named Baby Elle.”
- “I only have a mom and three cousins.”
- “I have a grandma and mom and dad! Oh, and a baby sister. When my grandma was little she had a pet parakeet...”

(By the way, for those children with strong interest in animals, we offer information or the opportunity to research how female elephants care for all of the young elephants or how male seahorses carry their fertilized eggs. It is amazing how the mention of animals will draw some children’s attention!)

And, for our artists (everyone!), we offer the project of drawing their own family portraits. Children choose the individuals they consider part of their families. This year I’ve seen groups that range from immediate family and caregivers, to a large company that also included the most precious stuffed animals of a child and her brother. Studying *family* offers children the opportunity to identify and include those they love most.

We teachers also model how we will share the photos by bringing in our own family pictures. That allows us to work in ideas that some children won’t mention without an invitation, such as divorce, relatives living in other parts of the world, step-siblings, or grandparents who have died.

In these ways, and others, we make sure that the classroom community is full of kindness and respect for every family.

STOP AND THINK: Our Own and Others’ Family Structures

As teachers committed to anti-bias early childhood education, we realize that some of the most important work we do is the work of reflection. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you consider how you talk about family with your children and help them develop respect and understanding:

- What was the configuration of your family of origin? Your current family? How was it similar or different from other families in your community?
- What did others (in school, in your community) communicate to you about your family? Was your family accepted or admired? Did you experience teasing, invisibility, or rejection?
- What messages did you receive from your family about families with structures different from yours?
- With what types of family configurations are you most comfortable? Least comfortable? Why?

(Derman-Sparks, L. and Julie Olsen Edwards. 2010. *Anti-Bias Education for Our Children and Ourselves*. NAEYC: Washington DC)

One challenge for teachers is getting to know about families through the parents. Some classrooms have tried to collect information about each family's culture and traditions through surveys. The teacher can then better prepare herself to have meaningful conversations with children if they are absent for a holiday or when a relative is visiting from far away. However, surveys can only scratch the surface in getting to know a family.

At WSMS, we are lucky to have home visits and beginning-of-year conferences, during which we can learn about what families do together, which people are important in their lives, what languages they speak, what they celebrate, and much more. We can check in with parents at the beginning or end of day through casual conversations, or schedule meetings and phone calls for other times. We can make time to talk with parents, but we also know that it may require a longer relationship before people are willing to disclose personal information. When parents do share challenges, idiosyncrasies, worries, or values with teachers, we feel honored to have their trust, and we also feel more capable to support their family.

Parent-teacher conferences are excellent opportunities for teachers and parents to have honest and supportive conversations. These conversations, however, can be full of emotion and even anxiety with the pressure of exmissions, challenging behaviors, or assumptions. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot wrote an excellent book about the parent-teacher conference dynamic. In *The Essential Conversation*, she considers the parent's experience of speaking with teachers, as well the teacher's perspective. Her work explores how past experience and identity influence how parents and teachers interact. Though the parent-teacher relationship can bring up challenges, it is essential to fully supporting the child.

At WSMS, we make it a priority to offer families a comfortable and welcoming communi-



ty. We follow NAEYC's guidelines: "Practitioners work in collaborative partnerships with families, establishing and maintaining regular, frequent two-way communication with them... [They] involve families as a source of information about the child...and engage them in the planning for their child... Mutual respect, cooperation, [and] shared responsibility" (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010, p. 36). This partnership is dependent on families learning about our school, our classrooms, and Montessori education. To truly partner with families, particularly as a Montessori school, we are obligated to provide parent education too. Paula Polk Lillard, in *Montessori Today* (1996), writes, "If education is to begin at birth, parents must be considered the child's first teachers. Montessori believed that parents needed and wanted help in this regard" (p. 28). We hope our parents come with questions, interest, and open minds to learn about West Side Montessori School and the practices in their child's classroom. A strong and trusting connection between home and school, family and classroom, serves every child in understanding himself or herself and his or her community.

Finally, though the classroom door closes at 9:10 a.m., we hope that our families will schedule times to come visit, to share their traditions, to read a book, or to have a meal. We also hope you will tell us during conferences, conversations, and even through surveys(!) more about who you are and what is important to you. In our classrooms, we



truly want to embrace every family with all of their special and unique differences, just as we know and love every child for exactly who he or she is.

Works Cited:
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