

**Understanding Cultural
Differences Between Home
and School for ELL Families**

A Guide for Teachers

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Introduction

This guide has been created to encourage and empower educators to be more self-aware about the fact that they hold the key to the communication and engagement with families of ELLs, creating relationships, and including them in the school community.

Research shows that ELL families want to be included and involved just as much as native English families are, “Most parents want to be supportive of their children and to participate in their children’s educational success.” (Edwards, 2009, p. 17). Included in this guide are ideas and suggestions on to how to include minority families in their children’s educational journey. Hopefully, being more empathetic to the needs of families different than the traditional American culture, will help bridge the communication gap that keeps parents and educators from working together towards the same goal.

Differences In Language and Cultural Expectations

Not only are English, Spanish and other languages different in many ways, including different alphabets and phonetic sounds, direct translations from one language to another can be difficult. Different dialects within the same languages and cultures also exist, so we cannot assume that all families from the same country speak the same dialect. For example, there are words that do not translate into Spanish at all, there is no word for “toe”, it is “dedo del pie”, or “finger of the foot”. “Awkward” does not have a Spanish counterpart either, “incomodo” (uncomfortable) would be the closest. Idioms are even more difficult to translate, “Whole nine yards”, meaning everything; all of it, translates to “las nueve yardas completas”. In most Spanish speaking countries, the metric system (meter) would be used for measurement, so by the time you translate everything, the idiom loses all meaning. Dialect variations on online translation sites can lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings; the best method of communicating with parents is using a translator or interpreter of the same dialect. Translators will translate documents, and interpreter will verbally communicate the message.

Misinterpretations due to difference in culture, shared by Mrs. Martinez (LR, June 2018), may include:

- Physical space- many Latinos/Hispanics stand or sit close to, and may touch, the person they are communicating with; there is no need for personal space or “bubble”
- Volume/tone- some cultures are very expressive when they speak, using animated voice changes
- Mannerisms- hand gestures and movement while speaking are common
- Eye contact- When speaking to someone with a title or authority, or when being reprimanded, eye contact is minimal; it is considered to be respectful
- Attire- When attending a meeting or event, many dress in their best clothes. One dresses in a way that represent oneself and the respect one has for the event.
- Formalities: As a sign of respect, a person of authority or seniority is addressed by the last name versus their first name, unless a request is made otherwise
- Salutations: Even when meeting for the first time, a kiss or hug is a common way to say hi or bye
- Elders’ opinion is respected, and carries a lot of weight- grandparents have a major influence and authority on decisions made within the family
- Family vs individual goals- What is best for the whole family comes before what is best for the individual, and priorities are set with these values in mind

Assumptions, Perceptions and Biases to Be Aware Of

As humans, we are vulnerable to bias; when educators are not familiar with the culture or values of their students, and do not have sufficient training in working with students learning a new language and culture, it is more difficult to be understanding of their needs. It is the responsibility of the school to show empathy towards students and their families, in order to build relationships that will foster whole- family engagement and success.

When working with ELL families remember that they DO:

- Care just as much about their child's education and academic success
- Attempt to help students with their homework, but don't always have enough language or academic knowledge to assist
- Want to be involved in classroom/school activities, but may have more than one job or work long hours
- Respect the teacher's role and expertise, and may feel that they are stepping on the teacher's toes if they inquire about the curriculum
- Desire to advocate for their children's needs and services, but may not know their rights or the process involved in advocating for them
- Want to contribute their time and skills to their child's classroom, but may be going to school to learn English themselves

Creating a Welcoming Environment

Edwards (2009) suggests creating a welcoming environment for parents. Suggestions include:

- Create Welcome signs or banners in various languages, including all the ones spoken by students and families
- Make home visits, to welcome families to the school
- Create eye catching bulletin boards with important information, include one specifically for parents
- Create “what we learned” story books for students to read to families
- Create a parent school-climate assessment survey
- Post school mission statement, and encourage parents and students to create vision statements
- Arrange for traveling friends where students check out characters and their books, and parents share the book and an activity with the class
- Host author teas when parents are invited to listen to research projects and written work by student
- Form a parent focus group for parents to voice opinions on different issues
- Schedule phone calls or emails for consistent communication, and share both positive moments and successes as well as disciplinary concerns
- Send monthly newsletters home

Resources Available Online and Through Monroe #1 BOCES

Monroe #1 BOCES provides some resources for communicating with ELL families, such as translated documents and interpreters for meetings or scheduled phone calls.

- BOCES interpreting or translating requests:

<https://www.monroe.edu/Page/2756>

Educators are welcome to attend professional development seminars geared towards working with our ELLs.

- Professional Learning: Through mylearningplan.com

*Developing an IEP for English Language Learners with Special Needs

<https://www.mylearningplan.com/WebReg/ActivityProfile.asp?D=13458&I=2974813>

*Distinguishing Language Difference vs. Disability

<https://www.mylearningplan.com/WebReg/ActivityProfile.asp?D=13458&I=2974739>

Educators wanting to learn basic Spanish can explore the following options:

- Learn Spanish online:

<https://www.babbel.com>

- BOCES Spanish teacher's lesson reviews, resources, and game links:

<https://www.monroe.edu/Page/1156>

References

Edwards, P.A. (2009). *Tapping the potential of parents: A strategic guide to boosting student achievement through family involvement*. New York: Scholastic.