

# How to support recently immigrated children and families with culturally responsive practice



ECE resources

Children and families who are recent immigrants face a variety of pressures and difficulties which may include a lack of language skills in the languages of their new country, financial pressure, and low social status<sup>1</sup>. Their limited or partial understanding of their new country's culture can result in excessive anxiety and fears about their children's achievement<sup>2</sup>. Some families may desire reassurance about their child's academic achievement, particularly if they are from a country with scarce employment opportunities<sup>3</sup>, or if they believe their immigrant status means their children will need to compete for jobs.

While our general guidance on culturally responsive teaching and learning in early childhood education will be useful, there will be some additional pressures and difficulties for children who lack English language skills and have conducted all their previous learning in another cultural context. Developing strategies for communication and mediating learning of local cultures using the cultural tools of home and family are important areas of focus.

## Communication

It is important to find ways of communicating with non-English speaking children in order to understand and meet their daily needs. Support children to use their home languages, and learn some words in the child's home language from them. It is useful to get a list of keywords and phrases from parents (for example, 'eat', 'toilet', 'listen')<sup>4</sup>, and, where possible, to encourage children who speak the same language to translate for them. You might also use objects and pictures to help convey ideas<sup>5</sup>. Ensure you provide experiences rich in language the child can understand, as language learning is thought only to take place when there is understanding<sup>6</sup> and is also more likely in relaxed environments<sup>7</sup>.

Offer activities such as manipulatives in which children can participate without having to negotiate interactions with other children, and which offer some respite from the challenging task of trying to understand and make themselves understood<sup>8</sup>. Ensure that you allow children plenty of opportunity to observe and follow other children, and keep consistent routines<sup>9</sup>. You can also support children to develop relationships with their English-speaking peers, as immigrant children appear to desire these interactions, but may lack the appropriate language and sociocultural competence to pursue them<sup>10</sup>. Research finds that non-verbal communication can be very powerful in establishing friendship relations<sup>11</sup>. Making friends seems to involve observing others, then making non-verbal overtures and non-verbal interactions<sup>12</sup>. Shared laughter can also help engender a feeling of belonging and groupness<sup>13</sup>.

Be wary of assuming that the acquisition of English is the central concern of immigrant parents<sup>14</sup>, and do not place too much focus on the development of English without also getting support for children's family languages and cultures. There is no need for exclusive and narrow attention to the dominant language of the early childhood setting in this period<sup>15</sup>.

## Mediating new learning with home culture

Parents' participation in children's learning at the setting is crucial in helping immigrant children to succeed in their early childhood learning experiences<sup>16</sup>. Parents are likely to require an invitation or direction from teachers for getting involved<sup>17</sup>, and explanation of expectations regarding their

involvement. Research finds that immigrant families are often keen to be involved in their child's early childhood education. Overcome any language barriers by using a translator or finding people in the setting or community who can translate<sup>18</sup>.

Explain to parents the importance of including the cultural practices of the family in the early childhood setting for mediating children's learning in the setting, as some research suggests that immigrant families lack an understanding of this<sup>19</sup>. Chinese immigrant parents, for example, tend to believe that children should fully embrace the culture of the setting and keep their Chinese culture for home use only<sup>20</sup>.

You can also use families' funds of knowledge and cultural tools to help children bridge learning from their home culture to the early childhood setting. Research finds that when Chinese immigrant children use their home language to talk and think about learning experiences and to interact and buddy up with other Chinese people, they are more likely to locate and use their family cultural tools<sup>21</sup>, such as persistence, commitment to learning, and a positive attitude to teachers<sup>22</sup>, to learn the new cultural tools of the early childhood setting. This research also suggests that immigrant children who do not have the support of peers and teachers from the same cultural background are unable to draw on their family culture to assist them in the early childhood experiences of the setting and their learning is impeded<sup>23</sup>.

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## Further reading

Guo, K., & Dalli, C. (2012). Negotiating and creating intercultural relations: Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood education centres. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37 (3), 129-36.

## Endnotes

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