9.1: Introduction

In this chapter, we will explore diverse family structures and terms that will help build a culture of inclusivity and equity. It is important to consider two overarching premises regarding family structures. The first is that Parents refers to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents. The second is that Families can be biological or non-biological, chosen, or circumstantial. They are connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support. You may notice that we have used families, often even when referring to parent/caregiver throughout this book in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible.

![Figure 9.1: This is a family.](image)

A feeling of belonging is critical to every child and family’s well-being. The drive to form relationships with others begins in infancy and continues throughout early childhood. These relationships help children fulfill their potential in all areas of development—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Quality early childhood programs can expand children’s experiences of forming relationships when the culture and core curriculum partners with families’ and communities’ central themes.
Many families have multiple identities and might include themselves in multiple family definitions. Most children see the caring adults who love and take care of them as their family and will refer to them in that way. It is important to recognize the complexity and variation amongst all families. It is recommended to connect with families to find out the language that they use to refer to their families to help respectfully answer questions that may arise. [116]

Understanding and conversations are important to gain insight into the structure of each family unit. It also assists in the individualization of the support offered to each child. Families come to an early childhood setting with distinct family structures and cultures that give meaning and direction to their lives. All families are complex and influenced by many factors: family traditions, countries of origin, geographic regions, ethnic identities, cultural groups, community norms, sexual orientation, gender identities, educational and other experiences, personal choices, and home languages.

Figure 9.2: Programs need to partner with all families. [117]

While every child and family are unique, many of our conversations with families involve common topics. We can anticipate that there will be discussions about learning and language, daily routines (such as sleeping, feeding, toileting), expectations, new skills, behavior, discipline, and relationships with peers and adults. We also know that each family will bring unique perspectives to these discussions. Ultimately, it is understanding the perspectives of families and seeing them as the experts on their children that helps create the best care and learning environment for their child. [118]

Below is a list of terms and definitions, many from the Welcoming Schools organization, intended to be a starting point for important conversations about family diversity. Many families have multiple identities and might include themselves in multiple family definitions.

- ADOPTION: When adults bring children into their families and legally become the parents of those children.
- ADOPTIVE PARENTS: The parents of children who have joined the family through adoption.
- BIRTH PARENT: A biological parent. People may also use the terms birth mother or birth father. Most often used in the context of adoption.
- DONOR OR SURROGATE: People who help other people have children.
- BLENDED FAMILY: Two families who come together to form a new family. This may include step-parents and step-siblings.
- CHOSEN FAMILY: People who you care about and consider family, such as friends or neighbors.
- CONDITIONALLY SEPARATED FAMILY: A family separated for a specific period of time; having a family member in jail, prison, a mental health care facility, the hospital, etc.
- DIVORCE: When people legally separate and end a marriage.
• EXTENDED FAMILY: All of your relatives, including your grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. In some families, this can include neighbors, friends and chosen family.

• FOSTER PARENT: People—other than a child's first family—who take children into their homes and take care of them for as long as their family needs help. Sometimes children will return to their first family, sometimes foster parents go on to become adoptive parents or permanent guardians and sometimes children will be adopted by other families.

• GUARDIAN: A person who has responsibility by law to care for a child; a person other than the biological parent who takes care of a child. The person may be biologically related to the child, such as a grandparent.

• INTERFAITH FAMILY: When people of different religious backgrounds are part of the same family. Some families choose to raise their children primarily in one faith, some choose to teach their children both faiths and others practice multiple faiths.

• HALF-SISTER or HALF-BROTHER: When siblings have one biological parent in common.

• LGBTQ FAMILY: A family in which some people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary or queer. This could include parents, guardians, foster parents, children, chosen family, siblings or grandparents who are LGBTQ.

• LESBIAN: Women who love women.

• GAY: People who love people of the same gender, typically men who love men.

• BISEXUAL: People who love people not exclusively of one particular gender.

• PANSEXUAL: People who love people regardless of their sex or gender.

• TRANSGENDER: When your gender identity (how you feel) is different than what doctors/midwives assigned to you when you were born (girl/boy or sex assigned at birth).

• NON-BINARY: People who do not feel like the words "girl" or "boy" fit. They may feel like both or neither. They sometimes use pronouns such as they, them, theirs.

• QUEER: People use this word as a way to identify with and celebrate people of all gender identities and all the ways people love each other. When used in a mean way, it is a word that hurts.

• MIXED FAMILY: When people of different racial and cultural backgrounds are part of the same family. People of different ethnic, religious or national backgrounds can also form families who are “mixed” in terms of culture, skin color, language and/or religious practices.

• MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY: When more than one generation of a family lives together.

• MULTIRACIAL FAMILY: When people of different racial backgrounds are part of the same family.

• MULTILINGUAL FAMILY: When people within a family speak more than one language.

• SIBLING: Children or adults who share a parent whether biologically or not.

• SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY OR SOLO-PARENT FAMILY: A family in which one parent cares for the child or children.

• STEP-SIBLINGS: If a divorced or solo parent forms a family with a new person and that person already has children, those children can become step-siblings to their children.

• STEPPARENT: When a divorced or solo parent forms a family with a new person, the new partner might become a stepparent to their children. [119]

• TRANSTATIONAL FAMILY: A family residing in two different countries.
What Programs Can Do

The family compositions represented in the populations served by early childhood programs are quite diverse. Staff members typically develop strategies for accommodating this diversity. Sometimes problems arise for staff members because the children and families they serve have not yet acclimated to the social changes this diversity represents. The problems can sometimes emerge in the interactions among the children who are puzzled by and react negatively to the differences or the stigmatizing comments made by some parents about others. A situation in one program may be an example: Katie is overheard by staff members saying to Martin: “My mommy says I can’t play with you because you have two mommies living together at your house.” It is unclear whether Katie really understands what she is saying, but the situation represents a teachable moment for the children and the staff.

A series of books may be read in circle time that introduce children to different types of families and point out what is common to all (i.e., adoptive families, foster families, single-parent families, multigenerational families, and families led by a grandparent or a gay or lesbian couple). These families represent different ways that adults come together to take care of and love the children they have the responsibility to raise. For some families and staff members, this may represent a complex issue in which they are caught between creating a safe and supportive environment for children who have two mommies and respecting the concerns of parents who, for religious or other reasons, promote a different view at home. In such cases, staff members may need to check with families and meet with them before circumventing what is said at home.

Two Mommies

This scenario involves an openly lesbian couple who enroll their child in an infant/toddler care program. It focuses on differences of beliefs and attitudes among staff members concerning the definition of a legitimate family unit. It opens up the thorny issue of a teacher judging a family as engaging in “wrong” or unacceptable behavior because that behavior contradicts the teacher’s personal beliefs. What do you think is the responsibility of a culturally responsive professional in such a situation?

The Scenario

For the first time, a family consisting of two female parents—both of whom are open about being lesbians—joins the infant/toddler care center. During the intake session, both women make it clear that they want to be acknowledged as the parents of the infant. They cross out “father” on the admission form and substitute “mother,” so that there is a place for each woman to write down her name. They also ask permission to contribute a poster that shows “two-mommy families” and a few picture books with images of two-mommy and two-daddy families.

The center director consents to their requests. However, when she informs the staff about the family, conflicting responses to having openly lesbian parents in the program necessitates a staff discussion. Christine, the teacher in whose room the infant will be placed, is uncomfortable with the situation. She tells other staff members that she thinks it is wrong to encourage homosexuality, since she believes it is a sin. She wants the director to tell the family that only one parent can be considered the infant’s mother, and that person is the only family member who should interact with the program. She also refuses to use the poster or picture books the family wants to contribute.
Marie, an assistant teacher, agrees with Christine. She even suggests that, to avoid problems, the director not admit the family into the program. She explains that since homosexuals cannot properly raise a child, she does not think the program should encourage homosexuality by accepting the infant.

Rachel explains that she has no problem with a two-mommy family, but she is worried that admitting this family into the program will cause problems with other families. In the interests of keeping the peace, she reluctantly supports Christine’s suggestion to identify only one person as the infant’s mother and that no materials show two-mommy families.

Carrie disagrees with the others. She takes the position that, as professionals, they have a responsibility to support all families equally and to make sure that all the infants and toddlers have their family visible in the program. She reminds her colleagues that the family composition and members’ roles within families vary widely. Carrie further explains that she is not questioning her colleagues’ personal beliefs, but argues that professionals need to act according to professional ethics and not just according to their personal beliefs.

Sarah agrees with Carrie. She reminds her colleagues of the following excerpt from the California Early Childhood Educator Competencies publication: “Cultural perspectives of children, families, staff, and colleagues vary widely on issues such as differences in individual children’s learning, strengths, and abilities; gender identity and gender-specific roles; family composition and member roles” (CDE 2011, 21).

Sarah reminds staff that there was a time when many people considered all single mothers to be immoral and bad parents. Sarah further states that it is equally prejudicial to automatically assume that all two-mommy families are “bad.” Carrie adds to Sarah’s point, declaring that child-rearing problems arise in families of all kinds of cultural backgrounds and configurations.

Think About It…

How is this scenario about cultural responsiveness?

How do you feel each of the staff (Christine, Marie, Rachel, Sarah, and Carrie) on their cultural responsiveness? Why?