

Let's Talk About ... Young Children and Family Structures



Families in an early childhood program may have a “mother, father, and children” structure. However, it’s also common to see single-parent families, foster families, adoptive families, and families with two moms or two dads. Some families face lack of support, stereotyping, and bias from the larger society. Working with family diversity calls for acceptance, sensitivity, and respect.

Working with children

Keep in mind that a young child's family is central to their identity. Children need to know that their teachers value their families.

- Find a term for children's important adults that doesn't assume a “Mom + Dad” family structure. “At the art table, you can make a card for one of your grown-ups.”
- Gently but firmly correct mistaken ideas or biases children express. “Yes, Garrett has two moms. The world has many kinds of families. Two moms plus children is one kind of family.”

Make sure classroom materials feature a range of family structures, including those not represented in your program.

- Provide play figures and dolls that a child could organize into any type of family. Affirm children's pretend play that reflects their family structures.
- Display photos and art showing different family structures. Include photos of children in your class and accurately describe family members. “Jenny, you and both your dads are laughing a lot in this picture!”
- Provide stories and information books that depict single parents, grandparents, foster and/or adoptive parents, and families with same-sex parents.

Working with families

Learn about families and the challenges they might face because of their family structure.

- If a parent or caregiver lets you know they need information or support, suggest where they might find it. For example, your local Pride organization may have events for LGBTQ families. Your park district might offer activities for grandparents and grandchildren.
- Find out what, if anything, a family would like for you to say about them. “Greg lives with his grandparents. He calls them Gran and Grampa.”
- Keep in mind that changes in a family's structure may be the result of trauma, such as divorce, abuse, or loss of a parent.
- Be aware that some families may face bias, discrimination, or threats in the community and may not want to reveal much.

Remember, an early childhood program should affirm and support every child's bond with the people who care for and love them. Let all families know that your program is a welcoming, safe place that respects the children's family structures.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



Children's Research Center
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Dr. • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
Telephone: 217-333-1386
Toll-free: 877-275-3227
E-mail: iel@illinois.edu
<https://illinoisearlylearning.org>



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