

4

The Makeup of Families Today

Culturally Relevant Strategies to Enhance Partnerships

After reading this chapter, you should have a better understanding of:

- traditional and contemporary family structures;
 - implications for family and school partnerships based on federal legislation initiatives;
 - activities that promote culturally relevant family activities and communication;
 - cultural and linguistic education for families (and teachers);
 - strategies that assist teachers in knowing their students and their families better;
 - developing and implementing parent-teacher conferences that empower students and families;
 - diverse communication strategies for teachers and families; and
 - alternative parent-teacher communication and homework assignments.
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Table 4.1 Prior Knowledge and Beliefs Organizer

Think about your views about the traditional family structure. Who is included in this family? Describe your ideas below.	Think about families in the 21st century. Describe different types of families and your views about what makes up a family.

As you read this chapter, think about your responses in Table 4.1 when considering diverse family structures, diverse needs, and the array of strengths and attributes within different family units.

Families in the 21st Century

Diverse Family Structures

As teachers consider the nature of children's lives outside of school, they notice that the **structure of the traditional family** has changed over time. This traditional structure consists of two parents and two children. Today, children live in homes with one parent, with two parents, with grandparents, with stepparents, with two mommies or two daddies, with adopted parents, and/or with foster parents. Family structures are diverse and vary within every community. Did you know that only about 4% of children come from traditional families where a biological mother, a biological father, and two children live together in the same home? Consider the students in your class or classes that you have observed. What is the family structure of each student? Is there a student with two mommies or two daddies? Is there a student who lives with his or her grandmother instead of a parent? Is there a student who comes from a single-parent home? Is there a student who lives with parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles? Is there a student who is adopted? Is there a student who lives in a foster group home? The children's television show *Sesame Street* discusses the term *family* with even the youngest viewers and states that a family involves "people living together and loving each other." Therefore, a family goes beyond a mother, a father, and two children.

When discussing families with your students, remember that families are diverse and encourage a celebration of who your students are and who they live with. Not



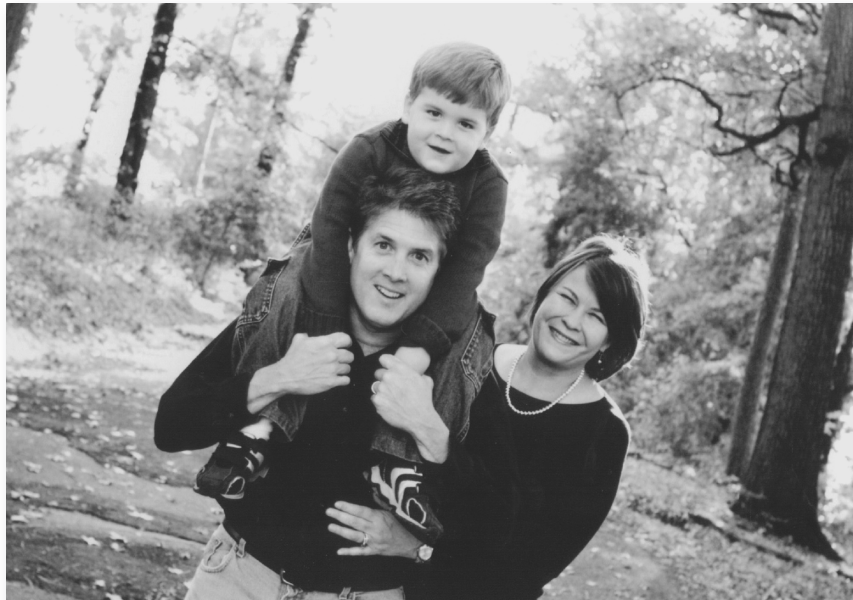
The structure of the traditional family has changed over time. Children today live in homes with one parent, with two parents, with grandparents, with two mommies or two daddies, with adopted parents, and/or with foster care parents.

all children live with their biological mother or father, not all children look like their parents, and not all children have traditional family structures like those portrayed in the 1960s television show *Leave It to Beaver*. Students should be taught at an early age that there are many different kinds of families and that families are formed in different ways. Families are groups of people who “live” together and love each other regardless of their biological parentage. I state “live” in quotation marks because not all fathers and mothers live in the same home with their children. In addition, some fathers or mothers may be incarcerated in another area of the state or country. Some children live in shelters, in hotels, in family cars, and even under bridges. A family is considered **homeless** if its members do not have a permanent residence or if they are residing in a place not intended for home use. Homeless children often have inadequate academic records and immunizations and experience academic challenges (Nunez & Collignon, 1997). Providing the broadest view of the meaning of family and “home” will create a sense of community within the classroom and allow all students to feel self-confident about who they are and where they live.

Changes in Traditional Family Structure

Number of Working Mothers

One contemporary change in the family structure is that most family members work outside the home. Working mothers make up 68% of women in the workforce in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Table 4.2 shows how the number



SOURCE: Used with permission of Sherri Hedrick.

A family goes beyond a mother, a father, and two children. When discussing families with your students, remember that families are diverse and encourage a celebration of who your students are and who they live with.

Table 4.2 Number of Working Mothers

Year	Number of Working Mothers	Percentage of Working Mothers
1964	7.3 million	32%
1974	10.5 million	43%
1984	13.6 million	59%
1994	16.8 million	69%
1997 (peak)	17.5 million	71%
2004	17.2 million	68%

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics Population Survey (March 1960–2004).

of working mothers has increased during the past 40 years. Given this increase, teachers should acknowledge, understand, and accept the external responsibilities that many families have outside of school.

Same-Sex Parents

Other major changes in family structure involve an increase in parents of the same sex. Several studies over the past decade have inquired into the impact of parents' sexuality and their children's success in school. For the most part, the studies are organized to compare children with gay and lesbian parents to those with heterosexual parents. Results of these studies indicate that a parent's sexuality has no bearing on a child's sexual orientation, mental health, socioemotional adjustments, academic performance, or engagement in high-risk activities (e.g., MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Nevertheless, teachers are not always prepared, though not necessarily unwilling, to work with children and their gay or lesbian parents (Kissen, 2002; Maney & Cain, 1997). More concerning, however, is the fact that gay and lesbian families report fears of bullying, feelings of isolation, and concerns that current curricular materials do not include gay and lesbian families.

Bower (2007) inquired into three different lesbian families in Nevada. She described their views as those of "normal" parents because all three families indicated that they participate in their children's education, enforce strict guidelines, provide for their children's physical and emotional needs, spend family time together, and take pride in their family. Lauren, one of the mothers in the study, expressed the following:

We are no different than the heterosexual world. We make sure [our daughter] gets good rest. She's fed well; she does her homework. She gets to school on time. We're involved; we're both involved. You know, I guess the biggest thing is that there's normalcy in our relationship. (Bower, 2007, p. 12)

Bower and other educators have lamented that “normal” is usually an exclusionary concept. Therefore, teachers must broaden the definition of the normal family and redefine normal when making decisions about curriculum materials, class activities, and family communication.

The Contemporary Family Tree

When teachers assign the task of creating a **family tree**—a chart, a graph, or another representation that shows current family members and family members over time—the structure and content should be inclusive of all students. One of the moms in Bower’s (2007) study gave this example: Her son “came home with the paper and it was two moms on the family tree. And he’s [the teacher] like, ‘Who’s that?’ At the school they totally tripped.” Family trees look different in other families as well. In my own family, we adopted our two children, and they know that they grew in the “tummies” of two different women. Therefore, when my children are asked to draw a family tree, they may choose to draw two family trees, one with their birth mom and birth dad and one with their parents and extended family. Children in foster care experience multiple families if they are moved around from house to house. Children who have stepparents also need additional space on their trees to name each and every family member.

Creating a More Inclusive Classroom

Multiple activities, discussions, and resources are necessary throughout the school year to provide opportunities for students and their families to express who they are. Here are some ideas to provide a more **inclusive classroom** that respects diversity and includes all families:

1. Allow time for families and children to define themselves through individual conferences, a family history assignment, or even home visits.
2. Reconsider the family tree assignment and ask students to draw pictures or cut images from magazines and create a collage to show off their families.
3. If you must hold on to the traditional family tree assignment, provide a template with many blank lines for important people in children’s families such as two moms, two dads, foster moms, foster dads, stepmoms, stepdads, birth moms, and birth dads.
4. Provide a variety of multicultural materials such as books, photographs, software, puzzles, and games that include a variety of different families such as those who are multiracial, have adopted children, have two moms, or include stepparents.
5. Provide a variety of materials that show children living in different structures: group homes, single-family detached homes, apartments, and mobile homes.
6. Be sensitive to the fact that some children do not have newborn baby pictures to contribute to a class bulletin board if they were adopted after the age of 2 or if they live with foster families who do not have access to these photos. Instead, make families more visible to others by celebrating the makeup of families and posting these on the bulletin board. You can have children draw pictures of themselves as babies, as toddlers, or at other stages of their lives.

7. Rethink projects such as “Adopt-a-Beach” or “Adopt-a-Whale.” Consider other terms instead such as “Care for Our Beach” or “Save the Whales.” These are more specific terms because young children already have a difficult time understanding the concept of adoption, particularly if they are adopted. These projects when termed with “Adopt-a . . .” could devalue the concept of adopted parenthood.
8. Listen and discuss issues among different children in the class as they arise. Do not ignore them! Even the youngest children observe skin color, family makeup, and ways that people form families.
9. Educate families within the class about diversity and contemporary views of families. Invite families to come together for pizza or coffee so that they can get to know each other. Establish community within the classroom and among families.
10. Obtain a variety of books that tell stories of children who live in multiracial families, are adopted, live with foster families, have two moms or dads, or live with a mom and a dad. Books have a way of helping children understand the different ways families are formed.
11. Obtain paper, markers, and crayons of all different skin colors so that students can represent themselves and their families during assignments.
12. Believe it or not, children do not wish to be different or special. Therefore, make a point to show similarities in children and families as you are celebrating differences.

Enhancing Learning for Students With Special Needs: Overcoming Negative Attitudes Toward Students With Disabilities

Negative cultural attitudes toward students with disabilities can inhibit opportunities for all students and families to participate fully in formal school activities. Hehir (2007) labels this as **ableism**, where the world is less welcoming and accessible for students with disabilities. An ableism perspective asserts that children with disabilities should use tools and act in the same way as their nondisabled peers. However, evidence shows that ableist assumptions can be harmful to students with disabilities and contribute to an uneven playing field. Therefore, it is important for families and teachers to work together to ensure that students with special needs are provided with tools, strategies, and assistance to promote equity in learning.

Here are some strategies to help negate ableism:

- Communicate with families, teachers, and students about ableism and how this strategy is not effective in promoting the best learning opportunities for students with special needs.

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- Provide alternative assignments and assessment strategies for students with disabilities. For example, allow them to discuss a subject orally, draw pictures, or create a project to show their knowledge.
- Work with schools or districts to acquire augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to assist students who have difficulty communicating via speech or writing.

Family Participation Initiatives

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires that districts and schools develop and implement policies to connect with families. Section 1118 of NCLB (see U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) addresses the following initiatives: (a) multilevel leadership that includes parents; (b) parents as an integral component of the school and classrooms; (c) parents and teachers sharing the responsibility of teaching and learning; and (d) steps and procedures including all families, particularly those who are not usually involved. In addition, NCLB requires that schools communicate with families of school-age children on a regular basis. This act includes “right to know” provisions where parents have the right to know their child’s achievement, teacher qualifications, and options for getting services such as those designed for English language learners and to be notified if schools are not making appropriate progress. All information communicated to families must be in an understandable format and must be presented in a language that the parents of the children can understand (McLure, 2002). Therefore, schools can take the initiative to communicate to parents their rights and encourage their involvement in their child’s education. NCLB also offers provisions for supplementary or tutoring programs for children who attend Title I schools that receive federal funding. As a teacher, you can create a positive atmosphere and communicate with parents about the myriad community resources and options.

A Culturally Responsive Partnership Between Home and School

Every family, regardless of income level, language, culture, or home, offers tremendous resources from which teachers can draw. These resources include cultural heritage and other kinds of knowledge and experiences. Send home a written **survey** (that students can help create, if applicable) and ask families to provide information related to their favorite events, foods, customs, hobbies, movies, books, and music. Students can interview their families and report the information back to school to provide more comfort for families when divulging the information. The use of reflective journals is another way to find out more about students, their families, their fears, their concerns, and their interests. When teachers allow students time to write or draw about what is on their mind, this provides insight into the students’ world.

I remember one of my second-grade students when I was a teacher in North Carolina. His name was “Leo.” He was the stereotypical outcast child due to the fact that other students did not want to play with him because of his erratic behavior. Journal writing for him was a way to express his feelings. One week, Leo wrote the same thing over and over again, “I love Gerry and Gerry loves me.” Gerry was the classroom gerbil. Leo was able to find positive experiences and interactions with the class pet even though many of the children in the class did not want to talk to him or play with him. This little piece of information from his journal allowed me to capitalize on his area of strength (i.e., feeling comfortable with Gerry) and promote interactive activities with other children based around Gerry the gerbil. It also sparked an idea to have Leo take Gerry home each weekend and take care of him with his family. On Monday, he was able to report what Gerry did over the weekend. After that, he was in charge of creating a class chart with specific dates and names indicating other students who would take Gerry home.

Therefore, *listening* to students and families provides much information about what they have to offer. Also, *communicating* with families and students on a regular basis will provide more of a shared understanding of classroom events. Many teachers find it advantageous to greet every child (and parent) at the door each morning with a handshake, hug, or high-five. This helps build community within the classroom and a sense of respect for all children.

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) recommends three important conditions that lead to more family participation: sharing information with families, connecting to the different families, and supporting their continued involvement. Specific strategies to promote these conditions are outlined in the next section to help teachers share more information, connect with each other, and support involvement. As you read the examples, keep in mind that a partnership is defined not by the number of hours that a parent physically spends at the school site but by the quality of cumulative experiences and activities that support formal school learning.

Cultural and Linguistic Education for Families and Teachers

Many schools and districts provide various education experiences for teachers and families. A **contemporary view of education** includes more opportunities for teachers and families to learn different languages and about different cultures. Parenting and teacher education seminars can be formal or informal. The best seminars occur when parents and teachers are learning together. Allen (2007) recommends that families provide education for teachers and students by telling stories and creating cultural memoirs. These projects can be accomplished in native languages to enhance the multicultural and multilingual benefits. Inviting parents to school to discuss their hobbies, jobs, and other areas of expertise provides a sense of community, education, and respect for all families and students.

Open House, Back-to-School Night, and Conferences

At least one or two times each year, most schools have an open house that allows families to visit the school. This is usually an informal meeting that takes place in the

late afternoon or evening where teachers and students showcase their work, projects, and other activities. Since many families may have prior commitments or work obligations, many schools prefer organizing two back-to-school events at different times of the day so that more families have the opportunity to attend.

For many families, an open house, a parent-teacher conference, or a back-to-school night is the only chance to get a glimpse inside the formal classroom. Although this should not be the only interaction between teachers and parents, it may be the only time that families and teachers talk face-to-face during the school year. One of the ways that teachers can plan ahead for conferences and encourage more participation is to have parents complete an advance organizer related to their child's strengths, challenges, and questions. This organizer can be completed collaboratively with the child if appropriate. These surveys should be translated, when applicable, to provide access for all families to participate. A sample organizer is featured in Table 4.3.

When the parents arrive at the conference, let them talk first! Listen to them and encourage them to share strengths about their child. Teachers can also encourage parents to discuss their educational ideals and any struggles that their children have encountered. Teachers should consider providing information about the child's strengths and progress instead of placing so much focus on the assigned grades. Teachers can discuss academic standards and expectations as part of the process, but the conference should be focused on the child and what he or she can do; then it can

Table 4.3 Advance Organizer for Parents to Complete Before Conferences

Question	Response
What does your child like to do at home?	
What is your child good at?	
What does your child struggle with at school and/or at home?	
What concerns do you have about your child?	
What questions do you have for me?	

move toward challenges that the child may face and strategies to help meet the curriculum standards. Some other ways to provide a more interactive conference is to feature examples of student work, student-selected portfolio artifacts, anecdotal notes, and pictures of students “in action” during classroom activities. Some classroom teachers create a PowerPoint presentation and play it continuously outside the classroom while other parents wait to enter. If computer access is a challenge, students and teachers can create a collage highlighting classroom events. In addition, audiotapes or videotapes of children interacting during class activities can greatly enhance the positive and interactive nature of a parent-teacher conference or open house. Many schools provide transportation, snacks, child care, and translators to encourage greater family participation.

Although yearly or biyearly parent-teacher conferences are planned in advance, we know that there are other times that teachers or parents request conferences that are not so positive. Usually, conferences take place because of a recurring problem or other issue. These problems usually relate to students’ academic progress, their social skills, or their self-discipline skills. Sometimes the issue is very specific and somewhat easy to address, such as a second grader who will not use the bathroom at school because the toilets are dirty. But sometimes the issue is much larger and will take collaboration among the teacher, the student, and the student’s family with multiple interventions to address an issue, such as a sixth grader who feels that he is being bullied every day at recess.

If a parent contacts the teacher and asks for a conference, the teacher should do everything possible to schedule the conference as soon as possible. The same is true for families who are asked to attend a special conference set up by the teacher. All parties should reschedule other tasks and responsibilities in order to deal with the problem in a relatively quick manner. Make sure that the conference begins in a positive manner before delving into specific problems. The child should be present at the conference if appropriate so that he or she can be empowered to address the problem or issue. Ensure time for true interaction throughout the conference where all parties are given an opportunity to provide their views. The teacher should make every effort to listen as much as possible rather than monopolizing the conversation. After problems are discussed, a plan of action should be developed before the conference concludes. This plan of action should be documented in some way. A contract among the parent, child, and teacher usually works best to monitor the issues in upcoming weeks. Figure 4.1 shows one type of parent-child-teacher contract.

Communicating With Irate Parents

When an irate parent confronts a teacher unannounced, the most important reaction from the teacher is to remain calm. Next, the teacher can take a deep breath and listen to the parent while trying not to get hung up on the tone of the parent’s voice. After listening (for as long as it takes), teachers should repeat the words back to the parent to make sure that they understand the issue or problem. For example, “If I understand you correctly, you are concerned that Angelica is not eating her lunch because other children in the class continually harass her, call her names, and make fun of her food” or “I understand your concern, and I understand how you and Sarah must have felt when the bus

Figure 4.1 Parent-Child-Teacher Contract

Weekly Contract										

(name/date)										
	MON.		TUES.		WED.		THURS.		FRI.	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
Objective(s)										
On-task behavior										
Complete class work										
Complete homework										

Daily Points: _____

(Mon.)
(Tues.)
(Wed.)
(Thurs.)
(Fri.)

Teacher signature:	
Parent signature:	
Student signature:	

left without her on the field trip.” Although I hope that you never have to face these same issues as a teacher, foresight and prevention are always best. A variety of issues will arise throughout your teaching career, and you should be prepared to deal with them in a positive manner and with parents as your partners instead of your adversaries.

Student-Led Conferences

Students and teachers can organize **student-led conferences** or student-centered conferences together as a team. These types of conferences differ from the traditional teacher-led conferences that most parents experience. With student-led conferences, students take

a major role in informing their parents about their achievements, interests, and assignments. Students take the initiative to showcase their work and progress during this time. The entire preparation for the conference empowers the students to take an integral role in their own learning and to inform their families about their performance in a nontraditional conference format. During traditional parent-teacher conferences, teachers do most of the talking, and students are not involved in the process. With student-led conferences, however, the students' role is to help plan the conference, make decisions about the work they would like to show their families, and make statements about their own learning and challenges they have encountered. The teacher's role during this conference is to listen, encourage, support, and answer questions. It is imperative that teachers and students notify families in advance about the conference structure and how their children will be involved. The parent's role is to listen, ask questions, and participate in activities.

Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2003) studied 524 middle school students and their parents from schools in the states of California, Oregon, Texas, and Washington who participated in student-led conferences. They found that 43% of the students who participated in student-led conferences set their own personal work goals at school. Parents of these students indicated that their children were more successful academically as a result of taking a lead in the conference. Teachers reported that they perceived their students to be more academically successful as a result of the new conference structure.

Student-led conferences can be organized in a variety of formats in an effort to include the student, the teacher, and the student's family members. A popular student-led conference model includes a total of 40 minutes of participation for each family. The entire conference is led by the students and facilitated by the teacher and parents. It should be noted that schools and teachers do not have to appropriate extra funding for these conferences because the cost of each conference remains the same. Table 4.4 outlines sample activities and time frames associated with the task. A student-led conference example that is featured as a case study at the end of this chapter will provide more information about the interactions that take place among the teacher, parents, and students.

Table 4.4 Student-Led Conference Activities

Sample Activity	Time
Interactive family activity such as making careful observations and recording information in the science center.	10 minutes
Interactive family activity such as participating in a reader's theater with puppets or playing board games related to grade-level standards.	10 minutes
Students showcasing their work in the form of portfolios, a PowerPoint presentation, or another delivery method.	10 minutes
Face-to-face conversation among the teacher, the student, and the student's family to analyze activities and student performance at school.	10 minutes

Multiple Communication Methods

At a minimum, teachers should write an introduction letter to families, in different languages if applicable, at the beginning of each school year. Better yet, hold an open house the day or week before school starts to invite families to visit your classroom. Teachers who utilize multiple communication methods such as weekly or monthly newsletters, e-mails, face-to-face meetings, and activities will improve communication and student success throughout the school year. One way to take the responsibility off of the teachers is to have students create materials informing their families of classroom events, what they are learning, and important dates to remember. Have all materials translated when necessary. The following installment of “Notes From the Classroom” shows a newsletter sent home to parents highlighting science content at school, suggested activities at home, and community resources.

Notes From the Classroom: A Sample Science Newsletter Sent to Families by Third-Grade Teacher

This month’s investigation will be into how and why organisms interact. Here are some vocabulary words that your child will be learning. Please ask your child to share what they mean during dinner, in the car, or while taking a walk outside.

- population
- food chain
- producer
- community
- decomposer
- consumer
- ecosystem
- food web
- organism
- habitat
- competition
- niche

California State Life Science Standards Covered by This Unit

2. (a–c) All organisms need energy and matter to live and grow.
3. (a–d) Living organisms depend on one another and on their environment for survival.

In the classroom, we will be conducting an experiment about decomposing. We will be forming hypotheses and predictions while gathering data over 3 weeks. For this, each student should bring a slice of bread in a bag by next Monday. Please place the following information on the bag: your child’s name, the date that the bread was placed in the bag, and the type of bread.

School-Home Connections

If you are interested in extending your child’s learning experience at home or outside of school, here are some activities and adventures that you can embark on. Have fun!

The Yuckiest Site on the Internet

Learn about earthworms, roaches, and other decomposers at <http://yucky.kids.discovery.com/flash/index.html>.

An Icky Experiment: A Fungus Among Us

This Web site will help you create your own experiment at home: http://yucky.discovery.com/flash/fun_n_games/activities/experiments/experiment_fungus.html.

The Food Chain

Extend your learning and find out how the food chain works on land and water at <http://www.kidport.com/Reflib/science/foodchain/foodchain.htm>.

SOURCE: Used with permission of Casey Weinkauff.

Another effective and simple way to communicate weekly is to send out a newsletter that features a few key items that are being covered in class with additional notes and reminders. Keeping newsletters concise and organizing them with bullet points or short statements can maximize comprehensibility. The following installment of “Notes From the Classroom” was created by a kindergarten teacher, Alejandra, whose template allows her to insert important information for families each week.

Notes From the Classroom: Weekly News Brief

WEEK OF: November 10, 2009

TEACHER: Sra. Becerra

Look What We’ve Learned:

- Phonics: “e” for *Ellie, elephant*; “g” for *gordo, gorilla*; “f” for *fancy, fish*
- Math: graphing using tallies, sorting, estimating, measuring

Special Notes and Reminders:

- Thank you to all of the families who donated items for International Day.
- We will be making Stone Soup on November 24. Families are invited to share in stories, writing, and soup at 1:00 p.m.
- Parent-teacher conferences will take place on the afternoons of November 18, 19, and 20. If you cannot meet on those days, please contact me so that I can schedule another time to meet.

Home Visits

Home visits have made a comeback in many school districts. Many years ago, teachers lived in the communities where they worked, and they knew the families of every child. Today, teachers and students often live in different communities, and teachers rarely know the families of the students they teach. Home visits bring greater awareness, understanding, and respect for students and their families. For almost 20 years, Luis Moll and his colleagues have been advocating the need for teachers to conduct what they call field studies, particularly as related to students from non-English-language backgrounds (e.g., Moll & Gonzalez, 1997; Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg, & Rivera, 1990). During home visits, teachers are learners. They learn about their students, their students' families, and the lives that students live outside of school. In return, families learn more about their children's teachers. Once a teacher learns more about a student's family and culture, communication between the family and the school can be more meaningful, and connections between learning and school can be optimized. Moll and Gonzalez (1997) claim that teachers who visit students' homes can identify these students' knowledge and strengths. By looking for funds of knowledge, the educational potential of students' households shifts from a deficit model to one that holds possibility, meaning, and educational understanding. Teachers should inquire into the cultural backgrounds from which their students function to ensure positive and real connections between their students and their families (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2005). Home visits enable more personal contact between teachers and students' families outside the school, create improved conditions in the process of educating children, and support parents' engagement in their children's education.

Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning and community as a social activity that develops from experiences and participation. We all partake in activities based on our homes, communities, and schools and have varying roles; at times we are at the core of activity, and at other times we are on the periphery as described previously. Some children and their families may always stay on the periphery instead of actively engaging within the center. Home visits can undercut some families' hesitation to get more involved in their children's schooling, because the visits show that teachers care, are interested in their students, and are willing to take the time and energy needed to get to know their students' families. In addition, culturally relevant pedagogy and inclusive practices can be enhanced when teachers visit students' homes and interact with the entire family in informal ways.

Vadeboncoeur (2006) identified five features that influence contexts of learning outside formal classrooms: location (where the learning takes place), relationships (who interacts and how they react in relation to one another), content (what occurs), pedagogy (how learning occurs), and assessment (how informal learning is measured). Using these elements when planning home visits allows a teacher to focus on one or more of these areas to determine how learning is constructed in a particular time and space such as students' homes, neighborhoods, and communities. During home visits, students' homes serve as the location for informal learning, the relationship between the teacher and the family is a learning tool, and content and pedagogy

are open entities. Assessment takes place informally based on teacher, student, and family interactions during the home visit and beyond.

Patchen, Cox-Petersen, Ambrose, DeVore, and Koenings (2008) found common themes across six different case studies of teachers who conducted home visits. They are listed in Table 4.5.

Multiple contexts including students' homes can contribute to informal learning experiences, particularly for teachers. Home visits with students and families have not been thoroughly examined as a learning tool or a context within most teacher education programs. Home visits can provide an important step to building partnerships with families and maximizing academic achievement for all students. Chapter 9 provides more details and information about a kindergarten teacher who conducted home visits with her students and their families.

Incorporating Multicultural and Culturally Relevant Materials

When choosing curriculum materials in the form of textbooks, DVDs, computer games, literature, and magazines, teachers should seek resources that highlight different races, cultures, and family structures. Look for kids who look different from their parents, kids who have one parent, or kids who have two dads. Better yet, have children provide their own drawings, writings, and interpretations and acknowledge them.

Table 4.5 Common Themes of Teachers Who Conducted Home Visits

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers expressed professional growth in the area of cultural awareness and appreciation for diverse family beliefs and structures.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers gained confidence in their ability to connect with families outside the school.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers reported that families were open and expressed their appreciation of the visit.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers reported that the parents they visited communicated more frequently after the home visits.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers faced barriers initially from the school district and their administrators when they discussed visiting students' homes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers reported that their districts and schools have few policies and experiences related to home visits.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple families from different cultural backgrounds demonstrated a willingness to open their homes and meet with teachers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families demonstrated a strong work ethic and wanted to assist in their children's educational endeavors.

SOURCE: Patchen et al. (2008).

In addition, recruit family members to serve on curriculum materials committees throughout the school year.

Rethinking Homework Assignments

The results of a large study of 709 students in elementary, middle, and high schools indicate that teachers view homework more positively than students and parents (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998). Nevertheless, Cooper et al. found that completed homework does correlate with higher achievement in school but does not correlate with achievement on standardized test scores. Paschal, Weinstein, and Walberg (1984) analyzed multiple studies related to homework and found mixed positive and negative results. They concluded that homework does enhance student learning if it is graded and if the teacher provides constructive comments related to the assignment. Jianzhong (2005) also found that consistent completion of homework results in approval from teachers, peers, and families and good discipline behaviors in middle school and high school students.

Although homework can instill responsibility and supplement formal school learning, sometimes homework assignments are too long, are too repetitive, and can cause undo strain on families and students. Homework should be doable and feasible. Assignments should be done in a specific amount of time and should not last for multiple hours in the elementary grades. It is helpful if the teacher writes a note to the families indicating the amount of time that children should spend on homework. If children are spending too many hours on homework after they have spent 7 hours in school, then they are usually missing out on important interactions with their families and friends, physical exercise, and other extracurricular activities after school. Assigning more homework than is necessary may cause unwanted “burnout” with children and families. Many homework assignments are nothing more than busywork, according to Bennett and Kalish (2006) and Kohn (2006). Moreover, too much homework can result in less academic achievement, according to a *Time* magazine article by Wallis (2006) describing the myths about homework. Teachers in countries such as Japan and Denmark assign less homework than teachers in the United States but have students who score higher on academic tests.

Many researchers, such as Cooper (1994), recommend that teachers and families consider the 10-minute rule when assigning homework. Children in first grade should have no more than 10 minutes of homework. In second grade, they should have 20 minutes, and in third grade, 30 minutes. However, Cooper reports that children who spend more than 2 hours each night completing homework tasks actually perform lower than their peers. In addition, homework does not seem to correlate with higher academic achievement for children in grades K–3. This view is supported by the work of Desimone (1999), who found that homework help is negatively associated with student achievement across all groups. Therefore, it is important for teachers to make an effort to provide students with meaningful learning experiences when they are completing homework at home. Also, continuous repetition of the same skill practiced at school does not necessarily aid in higher achievement. Kilman (2006) investigated alternative approaches for parents to help their children learn about math at home. One way includes distributing research findings to families and having parents

and children choose specific assignments and games to complete together. Kilman found that math-related games that involve positive family experiences enhance children's attitudes toward and interest in math over time. In addition, these games provide a shared educational experience for the entire family.

Helping students build background knowledge and connect learning at school to learning at home will provide motivation for self-initiated learning and more interest in school subjects. Many homework concerns that parents have voiced include the cost of materials and time needed to complete some projects. Teachers should be aware of the fact that some students do not have outside support systems and resources to complete many of the projects that are required. Therefore, teachers and schools can be proactive and provide a variety of interactive homework assignments that come in ready-to-learn packages, such as backpack projects. Backpack activities are popular ongoing activities enjoyed by many teachers and families. Teachers can acquire backpacks and use them as learning activity "centers" that students can take home and use with their families over a weekend or during the week. Companies or retail stores will donate backpacks to schools or teachers if they indicate that there is a need for them. Backpack Science has been a popular science-based activity in which students take home a backpack full of science-related literature and activities focusing on a particular science topic. The activities are usually set up so that the whole family can participate. Teachers can take this opportunity to communicate science content standards within the backpack materials. It is usually a good idea to send a letter home to families explaining the backpacks, the activities, and the expectations. Take a look at the sample letter in the following "Notes From the Classroom" section. Note that the letter is concise and explains things in very basic terms. Remember that many family members do not have a degree in education and do not understand a lot of the education "lingo." All letters should be translated into other languages when possible.

Notes From the Classroom: Backpack Homework Assignment

Dear Families,

This month we will begin a new science unit! We will be learning about different animals and where they live, with a focus on science processes such as observations, measuring, and communicating.

I will be sending home science backpacks during the next month that will help you and your child extend this learning at home. There are several books that go along with the science activities. Enjoy reading them together. This should be a fun learning experience for the whole family.

Please contact me if you would like more information.

Mr. Wang

555-333-2222

mrwang@anyschool.k12.mt.edu

Interactive homework such as backpack activities can be created for any subject area—math, art, music, social studies, science, or physical education. For physical education, for example, have more family interaction. The point of such assignments is for families to interact and talk about school and learning. The following installment of “Notes From the Classroom” shows an example of a home backpack activity that a kindergarten teacher and a first-grade teacher provide for students and their families.

Notes From the Classroom: Backpack Activity for Students and Families

- Read the story *Jump, Frog, Jump!* by Robert Kalan.
- Discuss what happened in the story and tell about your favorite part.
- Get some exercise! Go outside and practice jumping with the jump ropes provided. Take other family members with you. Jump for as long as you can and have someone use the stopwatch to time you.
- Next, put on the calorie counter provided and see how many calories you burn while jump roping.
- Use the Jump Rope Journal provided to keep track of your times each day.

SOURCE: DeVore and Ambrose (2007).



Encourage families to engage in activities together and write about their experiences to share with classmates. This can be done via a PowerPoint presentation, poster, or video.

Some additional alternative homework assignments are included in Table 4.6 to encourage more family interaction and participation. However, it is recommended that teachers give families advance notice of these assignments because they will usually take longer to complete than one evening. In addition, be respectful of families' time. Asking parents to accompany their child to a local park when the assignment is due the next day may not fit into their already packed schedule. Better yet, teachers can offer a list of homework projects that families can choose from on a weekly basis. Teachers should remember to send home any materials such as construction paper, blank calendars, or markers that students might need to complete each project if families do not typically have these resources at home. Teachers should also be careful when requiring students to obtain information from magazines, the newspaper, or a television show because some students may not have access to these resources.

Table 4.6 Sample Interactive Homework Assignments

Grade Level	Sample Homework Assignments
Grades K–2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students decorate a square piece of fabric for a class quilt. They can create a work of art that represents their hobbies, family, or culture. • Ask students to observe the moon on a daily basis, to record the moon phase and what time they saw it on a blank calendar, and to look for patterns over the course of a month. • Supply students with 80 books in the classroom related to different countries. Have them take a different book home and read it to/with their families. When they return to school, they can place their name on a world map next to the country that the book was written about. • Send home a class animal or another object. Have students write a story about their experiences at home with the animal or object and create a song to sing to it. • Ask students to count the number of shapes within the home and create a bar graph. • Have students plant a seed, water it, observe it each day, and record its growth and changes.
Grades 3–5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students take a walk to a local park, in the backyard, or in a vacant lot; observe what lives there such as ants, spiders, pill bugs, slugs, worms, birds, or squirrels; and draw and write about what they see including animal structures, habitat, and behaviors. • Ask students to record at least 10 foods at home and categorize them according to the food pyramid. Then have them write about which foods are most healthy and why. • Have students locate a family recipe, preferably one that has been passed down for many generations. Next have them double the recipe and then triple it for a larger crowd. Ask them to write a story about whom they will make the recipe for and where/how the food will be served. • Ask students to take a walk around their neighborhood and count the number of steps they and other family members take. Have them draw a map of their route, record each person's steps in a graph, and then compute the average number of steps taken by all. • Have students create a collection of rocks, leaves, or other objects outside or within the home; classify these objects into different groups; and write about why they classified them in that way.

(Continued)

Table 4.6 (Continued)

Grade Level	Sample Homework Assignments
Grades 6–8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students choose a type of food with a label at their home. Then ask them to calculate the percentage of fats, protein, and other nutrients and create a pie chart showing this information with an explanation of whether or not it is a food that should be eaten for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. • Have students visit the library, obtain a library card, check out a book, and write about the book they chose and why. • Ask students to play a board game with their family (teachers may have to rotate different board games and send them home with children). • Have students create a report that includes interviews with community members of different ethnicities and write about what they learned.

Family-School Bonding Events

Great value and added benefits result from promoting school-family-community events. The most successful bonding events are ones that occur each year, that families are familiar with, and that they anticipate. One notable event at my daughter's school is called the United Nations Day Celebration. Every year, students, families, and teachers in each grade level choose a country that they will celebrate. For one month, the students interact with people from this country via e-mail or within the community; work in cooperative groups to produce research reports about the country; and learn traditional and contemporary dances, sing songs, and cook traditional food. Families are asked to participate by sharing their

ideas, customs, experiences, and resources. On the day of the big event, families, teachers, students, and the community come together to eat various types of food from other countries and watch students perform a dance related to their country. One year, one family filmed the event and offered DVDs to each family. This DVD is the most requested DVD at my home! My daughter and son love to watch it over and over again and sing and dance to the music of different countries.

Other family bonding events can include Literacy Mornings where parents read with their children in the classroom before school begins, pizza nights coupled with family math games, and musical concerts performed at the school by students and families.

Promoting Literacy at Home

Teachers and families can work together to support children's reading development during vacation periods and other holidays. By providing specific guidelines and resources related to leisure reading, teachers can enhance students' overall literacy development and love for reading (Mraz & Rasinski, 2007).

Early home literacy practices enhance students' reading achievement. Home literacy practices should be promoted before children attend school and once formal instruction begins (Lau & McBride-Chang, 2005).



SOURCE: Used with permission of Denise Remick.

Students in this sixth-grade class learned about ancient Egypt, sampled Egyptian food, and learned traditional Egyptian dances to celebrate United Nations Day at their school.

Tips for Families and Teachers During Parent-Teacher Conferences

The “tips” in this chapter relate to enhanced communication for parents and teachers during conferences. They are outlined below and summarize much of the information about conferences that is included in this chapter.

Tips for Families

1. Share information about your child’s preferred learning style and activities that he or she enjoys. Also share relevant family issues.
2. Address specific concerns as they arise. Do not save them for formal conferences. Parent conferences are usually scheduled back-to-back; therefore, you will not have enough time to address specific problem areas.
3. Address your educational goals and collaborate with the teacher on achieving them.
4. Ask teachers about their expectations and sample class activities.
5. Scan the room. This will provide lots of information about what is going on in the classroom on a daily basis. Look for information on bulletin boards, student work, learning centers, and books on the shelf.
6. What other tips can you add?

Tips for Teachers

1. Listen! Allow parents to talk first.
2. Ask families to fill out a questionnaire before coming to the conference. This will give you more information about children's strengths and interests before you meet with families. Send multilingual questionnaires if necessary.
3. Some parents do not feel comfortable asking questions. Send home a list of questions (with space for additional questions) that families may want to ask during the conference. Have them bring the list to the conference.
4. Share actual pieces of children's work. This provides more information than letter grades on specific assignments.
5. Allow parents to participate in the conference with their children.
6. Provide an inviting and culturally relevant atmosphere. Make parents feel welcome during the conference and encourage them to visit the classroom regularly. Provide snacks as your budget allows or ask a local market to donate snacks.
7. Visit students and their families in their homes if possible, particularly if the parents are unable to schedule a conference at school.
8. What other tips can you add?

Chapter Summary

A 21st-century view of families is inclusive and celebrates diverse family structures such as families who adopt children, single-parent families, and families that have two moms or two dads. Activities at school and home can promote more inclusive and culturally relevant activities for all students. No Child Left Behind legislation and implications for family and school partnerships encourage more involvement among all educational partners. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) recommends three important conditions that lead to more family participation: sharing information with families, connecting to the different families, and supporting their continued involvement. A variety of educational strategies can be provided to empower families to want to participate more in their children's education. Some of these strategies include alternative communication, education for parents and teachers, student-led conferences, alternative homework assignments, and culturally diverse curriculum materials.

CASE STUDIES

Two different case studies are featured in this chapter. The first one, a student-led conference example, provides multiple views related to the nontraditional conference structure. This is adapted from a fifth-grade teacher, Carrie Marquez (Marquez, 2005). The second one involves a first-grade teacher, C. Gayle Morrison, and her experiences conducting home visits with each child in her classroom. This is adapted from a study by Morrison (2008). Each of these case studies will introduce you to teacher, student, and parent voices that describe their experiences.

❖ Case Study 4.1: Student-Led Conferences

The purpose of the student-led conference is to demonstrate to parents and to the broader school community students' academic mastery through performance or academic products. It gives parents the opportunity to see the academic progress of their students and allows students to take ownership of their academic progress. Specific activities and information were provided within this chapter. This case study will provide additional information and multiple perspectives related to the views of a teacher, a student, and a parent.

Voice of Carrie Marquez, Fifth-Grade Teacher

My school has adopted the use of student-learning conferences (SLC). Some teachers have chosen to implement SLC, and others have elected to continue with traditional parent-teacher conference formats. I started SLC for the first time last year and have decided that I will never go back to a traditional conference. I organized my SLC to include four stations with the last one ending with me. Each station lasts for 10 minutes, and I set the timer at my desk. My first station is reading where the students read an excerpt from a book of their choice. Sample questions are available in Spanish and English for parents who want to check their students' comprehension. The second station is math where the students complete a few problem-solving activities using manipulatives. The third station is writing where students share writing samples from their portfolios. Parents and students are asked to participate in "free writing" together if time permits. Activities vary from station to station for fall and spring conferences. When parents and students are discussing their achievement and things they need to work on, it takes the pressure off of me during conferences and allows parents and students to address their needs better. I am a facilitator and partner in this process.

Voice of Maurilio Alvarado, Fifth-Grade Student

I liked showing my parents my schoolwork. They really liked seeing stuff I do at school. Ms. Marquez helped us during class so that we knew what to do during the conference. I'm glad that kids can go to parent conferences now.

Voice of Ms. Alvarado, Parent of Maurilio

I liked this conference better than others. I was able to ask Maurilio, "What do you think you need to work on?" He answered, "I think I need more detail, descriptive language, and maybe my grammar." I agreed with him. Once we got to Ms. Marquez, we told her these things. I now know more about what Maurilio is doing at school and what we need to work on at home.

SOURCE: Used with permission of Carrie Marquez.

❖ Case Study 4.2: Home Visits as a Home-School Connection

Voice of Gayle Morrison, First-Grade Teacher

The partnership among the classroom teacher, parents, and students, though informal, has a huge impact on the education of each child in the classroom. In an effort to help parents feel more comfortable communicating with me and becoming active partners in their child's education, as well as to have more

information to help me understand the individual needs of each student, I conducted home visitations. My interest was in learning the following information:

- What can I learn about my students and their families from a home visit that will inform and improve my teaching practices to best meet the student's needs?
- How does the student's home environment support the student and his or her family?

I am a first-grade teacher in a two-way language immersion program where students receive 80% of their instruction in Spanish and 20% in English. The class is composed of eight English language learners and 13 Spanish language learners. The students come from varied cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic situations. Parents of Spanish language learning students are concerned because the primary language of instruction is Spanish and many of them are unable to help with homework. Parents of English language learning students are concerned about their children learning English and about helping in the correct way. Also, the Spanish-speaking parents sometimes feel a bit intimidated by the English-speaking parents who tend to be more educated and feel more comfortable in the classroom.

As our communities become larger, it is less likely that teachers and students belong to the same community. In order for students to be successful, it is important for teachers to gather and share as much information as possible about them with the people who are most interested in their academic success, their families.

Although I visited the homes of all students in my class, I will discuss one particular visit with Jorge's family. Jorge is an English language learner and a recent immigrant from Mexico. He is a 6-year-old boy working well below grade level but is very motivated. He comes to school every day but does not seem to receive help with homework. Jorge's parents did not attend Back-to-School Night, so I spoke to his mom later that week when I ran into her outside. She does not come to the classroom, so I rarely see her. In an effort to reduce the anxiety for the parents, I explained that I was interested in getting to know the students a little better in order to better help them in class and that visiting them at home would provide that opportunity. I also wanted the students to view the experience as a positive one, so I explained to them that I was excited to visit them at home and that they should think about what they wanted to show me or play at their house. Jorge was very excited.

One or two days prior to each visit, I called the parents to remind them. I used Google Maps to locate the students' homes. I visited Jorge's home on a Thursday after school. I brought a bag with our classroom mascots (a teddy bear and a lion puppet), books, a Spanish bingo game, and a camera. I wanted the parents to feel comfortable talking to me, so I kept the visits very informal and casual and did not take notes during any of them. We exchanged information about our backgrounds, our families, school, and the students. After talking with the families for a little while, I offered to read a book or play a game of bingo. During the visit, I asked about homework habits and who helped the student at home.

I learned a great deal about each family as a result of home visits. Jorge's family is very loving and caring. There was quite a bit of activity happening at the house when I visited. Jorge's sister-in-law was cooking, his dad was busy looking for papers, his eldest brother and brother-in-law were gathered downstairs,

another brother was playing with friends in front of the apartment, there were seven children under the age of 4 in the living room, and two teenaged girls were laughing and chatting. Jorge and his fifth-grade sister are expected to complete their homework in the midst of all the activity. He is a smart boy but is working below grade level and does not receive much help at home. Now, I understand why. His home environment is not conducive to sitting quietly. It must be very difficult for a 6-year-old to focus on homework when there is so much happening around him. It also explains why Jorge is so aware of all the people in the classroom. If other students ask a question or drop a pencil, he will help them, even if they are on the opposite side of the room. He has clearly developed an ability to keep track of what everyone is doing in his family. The number of people in his home is similar to the number of people in the classroom, and their apartment space is not much larger.

Jorge's mother became more comfortable with me as we spent more time together. Though she did not mention it, I got the sense that she feels intimidated at school and is much more comfortable at home. She really lit up when I complimented her food, and she talked about how she prepared it. I realized that it also must be difficult for her to spend the time necessary to help Jorge when, besides him, she has an 11-year-old, a 4-year-old, a 1-year-old, five young grandchildren, several teenagers, and a son- and daughter-in-law living with her. She would like to be supportive but is unsure how to help. The family's reaction to my visit was very positive. Since the visit, I have noticed that I am much more understanding of Jorge's situation and am more likely to ask his sister for help and create more open communication with his family.

SOURCE: Used with permission of Gayle Morrison.

❖ Reflecting on the Cases

1. How did Ms. Marquez and Ms. Morrison address cultural issues and family values during the student-led conference and home visits? What improvements can be made to enact these activities at your school?
2. Explain how enacting student-led conferences benefits (and challenges) students, families, teachers, and schools.
3. Explain how encouraging home visits as an integral part of teaching and learning benefits (and challenges) students, families, teachers, and schools.

Activities for Further Development

1. Describe two specific activities to encourage respect and appreciation for diverse family structures.
2. Describe at least three ways that you can include families, their cultures, and their hobbies in expanding the physical education, performing arts, and/or fine arts curriculum at your school.
3. Describe at least three ways to encourage better communication and active participation for families, students, and teachers.
4. Think about homework and alternative homework assignments for students. Create a list of three alternative homework assignments for your students or students in a specific grade level. Tell how these assignments will encourage positive attitudes about school and respect for students and their families.

Additional Reading and Information

- Allen, J. (2007). *Creating welcoming schools: A practical guide to home-school partnerships with diverse families*. New York: Teachers College Press. This book provides background information and strategies to help schools provide a more welcoming environment for all families and to promote ongoing partnerships with them.
- Bailey, J. M., & Guskey, T. R. (2000). *Implementing student-led conferences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. This book provides an introduction to planning, implementing, and assessing student-led conferences. Information related to participant responsibilities and effective models are provided.
- Benson, B. P., & Barnett, S. P. (2005). *Student-led conferencing using showcase portfolios*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. This book provides ways to engage students and parents in authentic assessment of students' academic progress. It provides strategies for creating portfolios, both paper and electronic.
- Kelly, M. (1990). *School-home notes: Promoting children's classroom success*. New York: Guilford Press. This book provides an array of resources to help teachers create good news notes and other positive teacher-parent communication strategies.
- Schumm, J. S. (2005). *How to help your child with homework*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit. This book provides information to help parents assist their children with homework.
- Winn Tutwiler, S. J. (2005). *Teachers as collaborative partners: Working with diverse families and communities*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. This book provides additional information about family dynamics and the social, cultural, and historical roots of families.