

## A director's guide

# Working With Non-Traditional Families

by Lisa Eisenbud

Single parents, step parents, grandparents as parents, foster parents, same-sex parents, racially mixed children and families, families formed through adoption . . . . What does the increase in numbers and varieties of non-traditional families mean to you as a child care center director? It challenges you to learn about these families, and how your child care can be a positive force in their children's lives.

Parents in non-traditional families, like all parents, want their children to be happy and healthy and to grow up to be the best people they can be. They want the same high quality care as other parents, but have an added concern about an environment where their families will be respected and their children taught the value of diversity.

### The Parents

The tools to help you meet your goal of doing what's best for non-traditional families start with good communication skills. However, with non-traditional parents this can be a bigger challenge requiring more finesse than usual. You are in the position of needing personal family information before you have the time to really build up a relationship with the parents. Many of these non-traditional parents, particularly those who are a dif-

ferent ethnicity than their children, may continually be asked prying, insensitive, insulting questions from nosy acquaintances and even strangers regarding their families. Therefore, they may be guarded about answering questions about their children and sharing personal information. Likewise, parents may be reluctant to be forthcoming for fear they will be judged, or that their children will be treated differently by staff. In addition, family stories may be painful, as with grandparents raising their grandchildren

or families involved in bitter divorces. A director needs to make the parents/guardians feel comfortable enough to discuss their family situations.

Let prospective parents know, from the very start, that you are not just accepting of diversity, but that you are a center that embraces and celebrates all families. Do this not just by talking about your philosophy, but by how that philosophy translates into the classroom and educates the children about different families; the activities you do, the books on the shelves, taking advantage of everyday situations to talk about all differences, teacher trainings on diversity . . . . Most importantly you want to communicate that children will be in an environment that lets them know, in many different ways, that their families are valued.

Reassuring parents that you are a center that understands the importance of supporting all families can go a long way in helping them feel comfortable sharing information. Phrases such as: "We strive to be inclusive and teach children that there are different types of people and families"; "We have a variety of different families at our center and we think it is important to get to know them"; "Learning about our families helps us get to know the children and how we can best support and help them develop as

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Note: The word *parent* in this article refers to any adult who plays a primary parenting role.

people"; "We are very proud of our commitment to teaching children about diversity and acceptance of all differences." Explaining why it is in the child's best interest for the adults around him to be aware of his family situation can help convince a parent to share important information. As director, you have the chance to put parents at ease and give them the message that you are their ally — that you care about their children.

Confidentiality and professionalism are also important messages to convey to non-traditional parents. Assure families that their family information will only be shared as a means to enable staff to meet their child's needs in learning the lessons of family diversity. Let them know that any information parents feel the director or certain staff should know, but want kept private, will be.

Nevertheless, even your best efforts may not always be successful in opening up a parent. In such a case you and your staff will just have to do the best you can in supporting and caring about the child and family. Over time, as you build a rapport, the reluctant parent may become more comfortable sharing information. By continuing to be supportive and letting parents know you are there for them, you leave the door open.

## The Children

In some cases, children in non-traditional families have been through traumas that will affect their transition into your child care, as well as their behavior. In others, the non-traditional family make-up will not have any overwhelming affect. Even within the same family types there are differences. For example, single parent families can be formed due to death, incarceration, abandonment, single parent by choice, or a guardianship situation. Children of divorce or those being raised by their grandparents have obviously had some sort of trauma in their lives. How-

ever, the situation of a child being raised by grandparents whose parents died when he was a baby is very different from a child who was taken away from a drug-addicted mother at age three. Likewise, a child born into a two lesbian parent family has very different life experiences than one whose mother and father divorced and then one of them realizes he/she is gay.

Keep in mind, even children who go through the same situations may react differently. Do not fall into the trap of stereotyping and generalizing about children from non-traditional families. It is a misconception to automatically assume there is a problem, or when there is one, to blame it on the non-traditional family make-up. As with all children, any problems require assessment of every possible contributing factor.

In many instances your child care program may be the children's first experience with the world outside their loved ones. Your reactions to their families will affect their identity and self esteem. Along with lessons in cultural, racial, religious, and physical differences, you can help children as they come to realize that families can be different. Every child benefits from learning that there are all different types of families and what matters is that they are loved and cared for.

A major goal of early childhood education is to teach young children that we all have differences as well as similarities. The challenge is to teach that differences should not be seen as negative, or something to be ashamed of, but something to be proud of and celebrate. Learning that families can look different, but also have much in common, can help teach the important lesson of acceptance.

## Your Staff

It is your staff who will be most impacted by these children from non-traditional

families. They will be the ones asked the difficult questions: "Why is Alfred's skin brown and his mommy's is white?"; "Where is Amy's mommy and daddy, why does she live with her grandparents/foster mom?" What will your staff say to this scene: *Two girls are playing dress up and pretending to get married. A boy comes over and says, "Two girls can't get married, you have to marry a boy." One girl, whose lesbian mothers taught her that there are all kinds of marriages, replies, "Yes two girls can get married; my moms are girls and they are married."*

Teachers have the power to open children's minds and hearts to accepting differences, to help them feel good about their families and themselves. "There are all different kinds of families; in some families everyone has the same skin color, in other families they have different skin colors. What's important is that everyone in a family loves one another." "Amy's mommy and daddy could not take care of her, so she is very lucky to have her grandparents/foster mom who loves her very much and takes such good care of her." "People believe different things about marriage so there are different kinds of marriages."

It all starts with attitudes and values about non-traditional families. You and your staff need to talk about and examine your own feelings about these families. Can a teacher who believes homosexuality is wrong be welcoming and embracing to a family with lesbian or gay parents? Will a teacher's quality of work be affected if she thinks divorce or choosing single parenthood is wrong? Teachers need to educate themselves about the different types of families to find the many similarities between them, as well as the issues and concerns that may be unique to a particular family in their class.

Do your teachers feel comfortable asking parents questions and speaking with them about their families? How do they feel when talking with the children about

different families? Perhaps you need to do some training to help those who are less comfortable or less experienced. Showing teachers that the same kinds of language and teaching they use to teach children about other differences can be used for family diversity. The goal in answering the questions, "Why doesn't Sam celebrate Christmas?" and "Why does Sam have two dads?" are the same, respect for and acceptance of differences.

Having staff meetings with family issues on the agenda gives you a chance to share information in a professional manner and not on-the-fly where confidentiality can be breached and information missed. It is a good idea to have a plan for sharing information with all staff including afternoon shift teachers and substitutes. Think about who needs to know if there are custody and pick up issues? Who needs to know if a child is from a non-traditional family?

Adding *families* to your agenda on a regular basis is a good way to ensure information does not fall through the cracks, everyone is updated on what they need to know, and teachers have a forum to discuss any family related issues or concerns.

The lessons learned in your program become instrumental building blocks in the foundation upon which children's self esteem, identity, and trust in people are built. Children are impacted, either negatively or positively, by teachers' attitudes towards their families. What teachers say, how they say it, and whether the lesson of family diversity is woven into the everyday world, or merely reserved for *Family Week* sends a message.

One of our jobs as early childhood professionals is to help children make sense of the world and their place in it. Children look to the adults around them for approval and acceptance. Having teach-

ers who not only think they are great, but that their families are great, too, can go a long way toward a strong foundation of self esteem that will serve your children well for the rest of their lives.

Some suggested questions to help you get at the information you need are:

All non-traditional families:

- Tell me about your family?
- What is your child taught at home (about her race, about having gay dads . . . )?
- What has your child been told (about parent in jail, about drug addicted parent . . . )?
- What can staff do to support what is being taught at home?
- How long has your child been in the present situation (how old was your child when adopted)?
- Are there any custody or pick up issues we need to be aware of?
- What other adults play a parenting/ important role in the child's life?
- What are the parents' concerns?

Single Parent:

- Is there a mother/father in the child's life? In what way?

Step/Blended:

- What does your child call his step-parent? Step grandparents?
- Are there step siblings?

Gay/Lesbian:

- What does your child call each parent?
- Are both parents legally the parents? (Programs need to know this for medical emergency.)
- Is there a father/mother in your child's life? In what way?

Grandparents/Other Relatives/Foster Parent:

- Where do you stand legally? (Programs need to know this for medical emergency.)
- What does your child call grandparents/relative/foster parent?
- Is there any contact with biological parents? What kind?

- If applicable, any known affects from drug abuse/neglect?

Suggestions for embracing all families and teaching the value of family diversity:

- Treat grandparents/guardians/lesbian and gay non-biological parents as parents
- Pictures and posters on the walls depicting all types of families
- *Teach tolerance* sticker displayed
- Forms that say parent/guardian not mother/father
- Family of origin and sexual orientation included in your nondiscrimination statement
- Learn what children call family members and use that language
- Books depicting family diversity, diversity in general, friendship, feelings, self esteem
- Get rid of out of date books and wicked stepmothers
- Use natural classroom situations to talk about different families and all differences
- Integrate various families into your language and every day play (two moms, two dads, adoption, step dad...)
- Teach children about feelings, empathy, and accepting differences
- Bulletin board ideas: Our Families, Who Cooks Dinner At My House, What I Like To Do With My Family
- Make "All About Me", "All About My Family" books
- "How are we different, how are we the same" game. (Teacher names two or three children and they think of things that are different and the same about them.)
- Have variety of play people for your doll house to represent a variety of families
- Be sensitive during holidays, ask parents what would be appropriate
- Encourage parents to visit, read, do an activity, come on field trip
- Find out what you can do to help their child

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- Emphasize to the children that *family* is the people who love and take care of them

The lessons of diversity should be ongoing strands woven throughout your curriculum that constantly evolve and grow. Seek out resources for more and different ideas and ways to incorporate them.

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