Today's Families:
Who Are We and Why Does It Matter?

by Lisa King and Kirsten Haugen

Today's families are more diverse than ever, and early childhood programs may be the first place a child or family will share who they are with the wider world. This puts early educators in a unique position to engage our growing diversity in ways that positively impact young children's sense of self and sense of belonging. In this article, we aim to briefly describe the rapidly shifting and expanding diversity of modern families, and at the same time, look beyond labels to appreciate the often unexpected and unique strengths, challenges, experiences, and perspectives of individual children and families.

We share insights from conversations we've had with several families about their own experiences, every one rich with joys, frustrations, and more. Their stories and perspectives illustrate the complexity of today's families. They compel us to go beyond helping children 'fit in' to instead strive for ways to learn about, incorporate, and leverage what is unique about each child and family, and to create a trusting, welcoming, and accepting community for parents, children, and teachers that will continue to evolve with each new child and family we meet.

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A Word on Language

Lisa writes:

On a typical day at our house, two of my boys, ages 9 and 10, argue over whether or not a 'contest' and 'competition' are the same. I suggest they consult that authoritative tome of our common understanding of the words we use: our big, old, red *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* from my college days. As usual, this only leads to more arguing over synonyms, antonyms, and the like. They carry their dispute and their skateboards outside, and I get back to work on this article. The abandoned dictionary beckons, and I flip to the following entry:

fam·i·ly — n., pl. — lies. Abbr. fam

1. *The most instinctive, fundamental social or mating group in man and animal, especially the union of man and woman through marriage and their offspring; parents and their children.*
2. *One's spouse and children.*
3. *Persons related by blood or lineage.*
4. *Lineage; especially upper-class lineage.*
5. *All the members of a household; those who share one's domestic home.*

Time for a new dictionary! A quick look at Yahoo.com delivers the following, coincidentally from the current *American Heritage Dictionary*:

fam·i·ly — noun: pl. fam·i·lies

1. *A fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children.*
2. *Two or more people who share goals and values, have long-term commitments to one another, and reside usually in the same dwelling place.*
3. *All the members of a household under one roof.*
4. *A group of persons sharing common ancestry.*

What a relief to learn that over the last 30 years, the definition of family has broadened to recognize families like ours and ones we've introduced in this article. Recent research reveals that young children already have an even more sophisticated understanding of family (Cohen et al., 2007):

- They recognize there are many different types of family structures.
- They give family a social rather than a biological meaning.
- They see family more in terms of significant relationships than close blood relatives.

Diversity is the New Norm

"In my family, what I want people to know about me is that I'm adopted. We were all adopted. The only one who wasn't adopted in my family is Daddy." — Mason, middle schooler

"What is the gay lifestyle? It's about getting the laundry done and figuring out what's for dinner every day."
— Stephen and Rudy

"We've moved around a lot and seen more than just what's here. Laural and I are opposites, in a way. She was raised by a single mom. I have two stable, married parents. We're a large family . . . five kids. We've got the mixed-race thing, and I'm a veteran. We're just normal people. Everybody is unique." — Brian

"We are a bilingual, bicultural family. We've lived in the United States and México. Our children went to preschool in México. They've always spoken English, but did not use it academically until we came here." — Ellen

"I'm 73, and my husband is 71, and we've been parenting our grandchildren. My daughter is an addict. . . . After a long period of treatment and recovery, she's doing well, but her youngest remains with us and only spends weekends with her mom. We're fortunate to have our family close. We feel grateful to be able to help." — Sherry

"The rest of my family is in Kansas. And even in Kansas, the surprising thing about my family is not that we're lesbian, but that we're vegetarian!" — Leah

"I am from two families." — Lauren, elementary student

"There are so many ways to describe our family. We never know what's going to be on the front burner." — Lisa

Family diversity comes, not surprisingly, in all shapes and sizes, origins, colors, and combinations (see sidebar: Diversity Data). The children and families who share their stories with us are not unusual. Some may face some significant challenges, but all are basically getting by or doing well. Experiences have included divorce, single parenting, immigration, learning English, grandparents as caregivers, sandwich generations, special needs, adoption, fostering, step-family blends, military deployments, homelessness, disabilities, parents or offspring who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT), religious minorities, and more.* Beyond that, these and all families are fluid — continuously touched and reshaped by illness, death, separation, divorce, the addition of family members, economics, and other caregiver-related changes. We can no longer think of each instance of diversity as an exception.

*Footnote: Addressing the needs of children and families in crisis or conflict may require specialized support and is beyond the scope of this article.

Acknowledging and accepting this growing diversity and fluidity of families can challenge our own experiences, and our beliefs or attitudes about what makes a family and even how to teach young children. Doing so requires us to stretch, sometimes in uncomfortable ways, to communicate more and take more risks. It also gives us the opportunity to create environments that are welcoming to all, where children and families are invited to help build community rather than being asked to 'fit in.'

What We Do Matters

"Before Ilsa started preschool, it was like living in a big cocoon. With preschool, it was like, this is the start of coming out of the cocoon." — Kirsten

Most children who come into our care already have a sense of belonging in their families. Our job as early educators is to help them carry this over into their social identities. The images, words, and representations of families in media, books, and even in our daily language have not changed as rapidly as reality. Trumbull and Pacheco (2005) report, "There are countless ways that children in 'traditional' nuclear families have their reality mirrored back to them. Kids in other kinds of structures often feel invisible or even ashamed."

Handed-down assumptions about children, families, and learning that pervade our culture and institutions require that we make a conscious effort to truly shift our views and actions to pay attention to the messages we send to children and families through our words, expectations, images, and learning materials. Hollins (1996) notes that with few exceptions, the culture of American schools represents a system of beliefs, values, and practices that reflect the implicit values of the dominant U.S. culture, which in turn influence how students interact with each other, how teachers and students interact, and how the rewards system is organized (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). This unconscious, dominant perspective is more visible and at times more daunting to families who do not fit the traditional mold.

Looking Beyond Labels

Understanding demographic shifts is a beginning, not an end, to understanding the diverse experiences of the children and families we work with.

"Some things about our family are visually obvious, such as both parents are women, we are older than most parents with kids our age, and our family is interracial. Other things are not as obvious: we are Jewish, vegetarian, and very committed to nonviolent conflict resolution." — Clare

"I'm Swedish. My husband is African American. My children are surprised when people think they are black. They see themselves as mixed, and both sides are important to them. We don't really understand what all the fuss is about." — Susanne

"In the military we used labels all the time. It was a way to dehumanize others. It made people less than what they were. We need to see beyond descriptors to understand people more three-dimensionally, to have successful relationships." — Brian

"The biggest thing I want people to understand is we are a committed two-parent family. Whoever sits at the dinner table every night doesn't have to have a specific sex. We may look different on the outside, but we want our children to be respected, cared for, and loved." — Kirsten

Unexpected Strengths and Challenges

Some differences have inherent challenges. It's simply hard to live in poverty, to face a health crisis, or to manage in a new culture or with a new language. But keep in mind, other differences present challenges that arise or are amplified by cultural norms or expectations. Furthermore, what challenges some families may be a non-issue or even a strength or source of pride for others. When families differ from the norm, they may be able to think more deeply or broadly about who they are. They may be more aware of or in tune with things going on behind the scenes. And through it all, their 'insides' are far more complex than their 'outsides.'

"I'm a single parent. My parents, who live separately, do much in providing overnight care and in getting my daughter to daycare in the morning when I have to be at work. We have support from friends in town, too. My daughter is well loved and cared for by many people." — Frannie

"Because of our own experience, we are more conscious of race and how it affects all people and what race means in different parts of our community." — Beth

"Because of the differences we have, we have more . . . openness? We are more respectful of others who have

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PHOTO BY LISA KING; ARTWORK BY ALEX

differences. Because there's a parent with a disability in our family, I think it makes us more comfortable with others who have disabilities." — Leah

"We are sensitive to how differences are portrayed in the media, and in society, because the messages that are sent are often about us. And they are often wrong!" — Lisa

> Knowing that we can't predict what each family may want, need, or might offer, the way we respond to problems that arise communicates our beliefs.
> We are the messengers; we shape the evolving dominant culture.
> We are models of best responses.

"Categorizing and labeling are natural. It's how we process the world around us, but I'd like educators to find out more — what's beyond the label. If we could say it out loud and talk openly about assumptions — get to know the people behind the labels. . . . I want people to become more self-aware of their own assumptions when seeing our family." — Clare

"Our strength is that we have love, respect for each other, structure in our family, and strong moral values." – Leah

"It's a challenge getting used to people asking us questions and learning how to answer or deflect them. Maybe that's a strength, too, because we get opportunities to talk to people about family." — Beth

"I am a wiser and better parent now than I ever would have been in my 20s, or even 30s, so I do think there are advantages to being an older parent." — Frannie

What Families Want

"I would like educators to find out as much as possible about each and every child in their classroom, about their unique culture and family situation. I would like them to help foster an understanding and accepting environment where all kinds of families are discussed regularly in a very natural and open way, and they are celebrated. A place where the diversity of people and ideas are also discussed, valued, and incorporated into the school day." — Frannie

"I want educators to be more patient and more open-minded about other people's cultures and traditions. A teacher respected our religious event. That was important to me." — Amsatou

"Please respect my family by getting to know each of us." — Beth
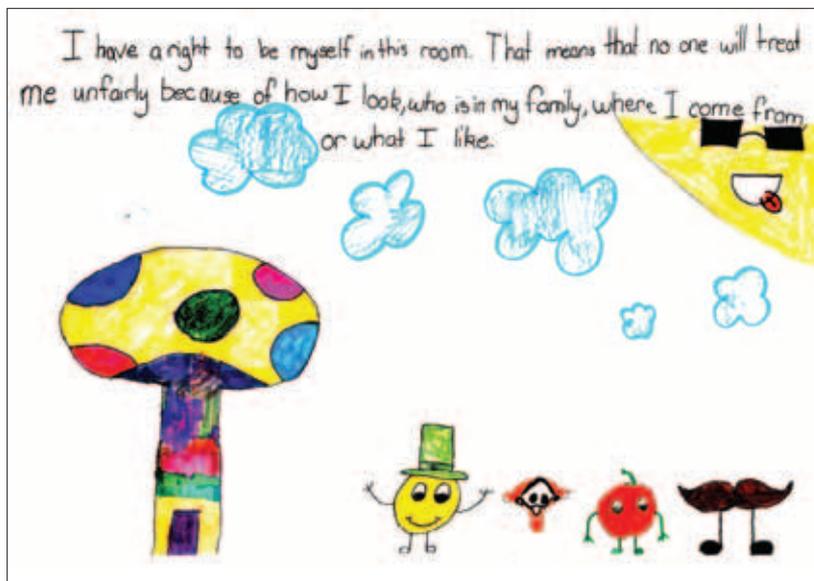
Educators have many opportunities to regularly re-examine and revise ways to develop meaningful relationships. The way the intake process is organized, the language we use, and the way the classroom materials are chosen and presented matters. Celebrating a child's 'Adoption Day' or addressing letters to parents/guardians/caregivers, for example, recognizes and normalizes the diversity of today's families. The families we spoke with were touched by many things educators have done to recognize that there are differences, and that beyond being special, those differences are just normal. These actions help our children know that they continue to belong.

Making a Difference

"Our preschool is always respectful of differences. They bring multiple views into the classroom through books, materials, and music. They recognize what's important to the kids and are comfortable talking about everything." — Beth

"In preschool the teachers would make sure when talking about families that they had books, pictures on the wall, stories that were appropriate, and showed a wide variety of families. It was great how they would — what seemed like incidentally — mention families with differences. Not centering on it, but naturalizing differences." — Leah

Reflecting on Families

That's A Family: Watch the trailer for *That's a Family*, a documentary aimed at children in kindergarten to fifth grade. Use the teaching guide to consider the messages and opportunities it inspires (groundspark.org/our-films-and-campaigns/thatfamily).

Family Fluidity: Describe your own family today, five years ago, and five years from now. Families are fluid, not static. What events have changed the structure of your family, its needs, attitudes, or resilience?

Imagine A Family: What image comes to mind when you hear the word family? Who is in it? What do they look like? Does your image shift if you add the word adopted? Special needs? Multiracial? Immigrants? Divorced? Gay or lesbian? Homeless?

Just Google It: Try searching the web for images of 'normal American family' or 'happy American family.' Then try adding different demographic descriptors into the search. How do the results change? Are the images positive? Accurate? Up to date?

Look at the families portrayed in advertisements: What family structures, belongings, and values do these images promote?

Up A (Family) Tree?: Does the family tree still work as a metaphor for the way families form? We've heard people talk of the family constellation, the modern family, the organic family, the nuclear family, and the family quilt. Can any single phrase encompass the wide variety of situations that real families are experiencing?

Mirrors and Windows: Explore how another family is both similar (a mirror) and different (a window) to your own. (groundspark.org/our-films-and-campaigns/thatfamily/taf_discussart).

Do we . . .
- 🟥 Use what we know to make activities feel special for all children?
- 🟦 Work with families to build trust?
- 🟨 Avoid making families feel vulnerable or inadequate?
- 🟪 Work as a team with parents to solve problems?
- 🟩 Try to find out what families think is important?
- 🟥 Communicate in a variety of ways with families every day?

Family Friendly?

As a staff, use the questions suggested by Civian and Shannon (2004) to ask yourselves, Do we . . .
- use what we know to make activities feel special for all children?
- work with families to build trust?
- avoid making families feel vulnerable or inadequate?
- work as a team with parents to solve problems?
- try to find out what families think is important?
- communicate in a variety of ways with families every day?

Before beginning any classroom activity, review your materials with your current group of children in mind. How are the children included or excluded by the images, language, or process of the activities or materials?

Our preschool attempted to find a Cinderella story from every country of origin for each kid in the classroom."
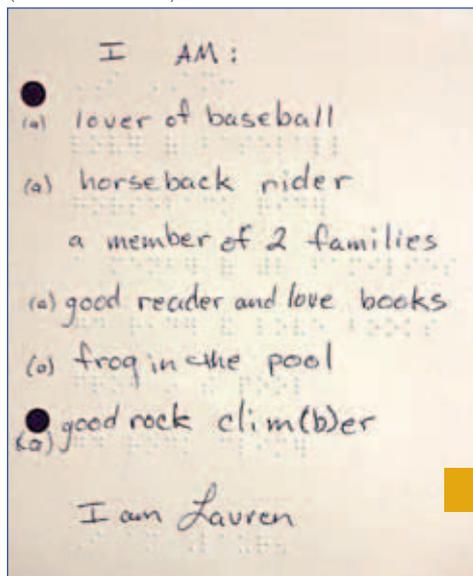— Frannie

"My second grade teacher was nice and she was interested in my West African origins." — Fatou, middle school

"Finding the balance between marginalizing and addressing differences is not easy. We need special treatment. It's necessary for us for communication, which is a pretty basic need. In the day-to-day, we're just the same as anybody, but because of my partner's deafness, communication is much more important in our family than in others'. There are bigger consequences if something goes wrong. For example, the school can't just pick up the phone and call if they need Sharon. We need to plan ahead." — Leah

"Our recent homelessness was an unexpected challenge. We were living in a trailer in the back parking lot of the Friends Meeting House across from the school. The principal let us use a spare room in the building in the evenings for homework, and other things. We didn't have to ask. It was offered to us. That really helped." — Brian

"I said to the director, 'I know it's going to be really hard [to provide materials on time in Braille]. But do you want to know what's hard? Being a deaf-blind kindergartner is hard.' He got it, eventually. One thing I loved was when Lauren was invited to teach the kindergarten class about Braille. She was very happy to do it. They all wanted their names in Braille. It was her chance to be the expert and tell others something she's

I AM… AN INSPIRING MESSAGE FROM A 10-YEAR-OLD GIRL ADOPTED FROM VIETNAM. SHE IS ALSO BLIND AND HARD OF HEARING. HER FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES HAS TAKEN HER TO VISIT HER BIRTH FAMILY TWICE, AND HER POEM REVEALS THIS CONNECTION AS A KEY PART OF HER IDENTITY. (PHOTO BY SARAH GILLEM)

an expert about . . . ." — Sarah

Knowing that we can't predict what each family may want, need, or might offer, the way we respond to problems that arise communicates our beliefs. We are the messengers; we shape the evolving dominant culture. We are models of best responses.

"Roscoe wore his pink shirt and came home unhappy because some kids told him it was a girl color. After a quick email, the principal wore his pink shirt the next day!" — Lisa

"Instead of saying to a second-grader, 'We don't tolerate that kind of comment here,' they could use the comment as a discussion point." — Leah

In our experiences, some of the most positive things have happened when . . .

- Boundaries between home and school get blurred a bit: When the kindergarten teacher made a home visit before school started and plopped down on our less-than-sparkling floor to play Legos or when the third grade teacher wrote really, really thoughtful comments on a report card.

Diversity Data: A Snapshot

- "Family living arrangements and trajectories are increasingly varied and complex in the United States. Age of marriage is at an all-time high. Cohabitation, not marriage, is the typical first type of union in U.S. society. Divorce and remarriage remain common, and births to unmarried women have accelerated rapidly, from 5% in 1960 to about 40% today" (Olson, 2011).

- More than four out of ten adopted children (43%) lived with their birth families at some time prior to their adoption (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). Adopted children are less likely than are children in the general population to live in households with incomes below the poverty threshold (12% vs. 18%), and more likely to be read or sung to by their parents (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009).

- As of 2010, nearly one in four children in the United States is the son or daughter of an immigrant. Seventy percent of these children are American citizens. These young Americans will make up at least 25% of our new workers, parents, and voters for the next two decades (New American Children). Also in 2010, 22% of children ages 5-17 spoke a language other than English at home, up from 18% in 2000. One in 20 children have difficulty speaking English (Wallman, 2012).

- As of 2010, approximately one in 12 children had a disability, half of those being severe disabilities. Most disabilities are cognitive in nature (Brau, M. 2010).

- About one in seven children in 2009-2010 had a special health care need, according to their parent's report (Child Trends, 2012).

- "In 2010, 22% of children ages 0-17 (16.4 million) lived in poverty. This is up from a low of 16% in 2000 and 2001." One in ten children lived in homes with incomes below half the poverty threshold (Wallman, 2012).

- Families now make up 40% of the U.S. homeless population. "The typical homeless family is headed by a single mother, usually in her late 20s. She has with her two or three young children, typically preschoolers" (Bassuk, E., Friedman, S., et al., 2005).

- Racial and ethnic diversity has grown in the United States . . .

- By 2023, less than half of all children are projected to be white, non-Hispanic. By 2050, 39% of U.S. children are projected to be Hispanic (up from 24% in 2011), and 38% are projected to be white, non-Hispanic (down from 53% in 2011 and 62% in 2000) (Wallman, 2012). Children who identify with two or more race groups are projected to make up 5% of all U.S. children by 2050 (up from 4% in 2011) (Wallman, 2012).

- One million gay and lesbian parents are raising two million kids in the U.S. (Family Equality Council, 2012). Same-sex couples with only adopted or only stepchildren have significantly higher incomes than both married and unmarried opposite-sex households. Four percent of all adopted children in the U.S. are being raised by gay or lesbian parents (Gates et al., 2007).

■ Communication is open, personal and non-threatening. Teachers do not feel the need to be 'the expert.'

■ Teachers and administrators offer flexibility within the expectations or requirements of both kids and families, including how families can contribute.

■ Educators model some risk taking.

■ The child and family feel valued.

■ Feedback is genuine and positive feedback is not false.

The common denominator is a willingness to get to know families as they are, rather than in comparison to a traditional norm, and an effort to build multiple open, genuine avenues of communication.

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