There is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child’s education from day one.

—President Barack Obama (2010)

As an educator, your focus is on effective teaching and assessment strategies, classroom management skills, content expertise, and a myriad of other pedagogical skills and knowledge. However, a crucial aspect of development as a responsive educator is knowing how to collaborate authentically and effectively with students’ families. Research has shown that the most effective teachers and schools are those with strong family engagement programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Historically, family engagement has been consistently mandated at both the federal and state levels, beginning with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and continuing through the No Child Left Behind legislation (1994) and currently with the Obama administration’s “blueprint” for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2010). This proposal reflects the importance of strengthening and supporting family engagement both through specific programs designed to involve families and communities and through policies that will engage and empower parents. It will ensure that families have the information they need about their children’s schools and enhance the ability of teachers and leaders to include families in the education process. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 1)

This text is designed to help teachers become responsive family engagement practitioners, and, while reading this chapter, to consider these questions:

- What does it mean to become a “partner” with families?
- How do I feel about developing home-school partnerships?
• What are the benefits and barriers of family engagement?
• What are today’s families like in structure and culture?
• How can I practice culturally responsive family engagement?
• What does it mean to have ethical practice in family engagement?

PREPARING FOR FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS: ACTUALIZING THE PROCESS

Working toward genuine partnerships with students’ families may be one of the most rewarding experiences for a responsive educator. Establishing those partnerships may be elusive, but once established, the family’s element of trust in their child’s teacher may be secure. Trust is a critical component of collaborative partnerships between families and teachers, and a trusting relationship begins with teachers who are committed to and respectful of all families.

This is especially important since researchers have found that parents are more likely to be involved in their child’s education if they trust their child’s teacher (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Realistically, establishing authentic partnerships with families can be challenging, undoubtedly time intensive, and many times, it depends on creative problem-solving techniques to cement the relationship. As a responsive educator, it may be apparent that some family members may not be involved in schools in the expected ways, such as volunteering in the classroom or chaperoning a field trip. However, this does not mean that they are not interested in their children’s academic and social progress (Compton-Lilly, 2004). It may mean instead that you will need to develop a variety of family engagement strategies that fit today’s diverse families’ lifestyles, issues, and beliefs about their role in their child’s education. Researchers have found that when teachers reach out to families, the families are more likely to be involved in their child’s education in some way, resulting in strong, consistent gains in student performance in both reading and math (Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001).

Allocating extra time to nurture relationships with families throughout the school year is essential. A key research finding in effective family engagement practices is that relationships matter: When school staff view and treat families and community members as assets in the process of educating students as opposed to liabilities, positive relationships can develop (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This may require several more hours during an already busy day for tasks such as meeting with a parent or updating the class website with new pictures of class activities and links for homework help. As relationships with families develop and mature, the time spent will pay big dividends, with students seeing a connection between home and school and gaining more support in teaching efforts. In reality, families generally know their children much better than the educator ever will, and they can be a valuable resource in helping students reach their potential.
How can the educator develop a mutually respectful relationship with families? This textbook is designed to answer that question, with a focus on adopting a culturally responsive family engagement approach. This approach involves practices that respect and acknowledge the cultural uniqueness, life experiences, and viewpoints of classroom families and draw on those experiences to enrich and energize the classroom curriculum and teaching activities, leading to respectful partnerships with students’ families. Some ideas that will be further explored in future chapters include the following:

- How the family operates as a system and the implications this and other family involvement models have for your teaching practices
- The wide range of diversity in today’s families, in structure and culture
- The difficult issues that contemporary families face that may have an impact on their ability to be engaged in their children’s education
- Ways to collaborate with families on their children’s education, including families of children with special needs
- Effective school-home communication practices—oral, written, and technological means of communication
- Classroom and school environments that are welcoming, with family resource centers and supportive volunteer policies and practices
- Family events that can be held throughout the year, such as literacy, math, or science family nights
- Community resources available to support families and educators

While this process of learning how to develop partnerships with the families of students may seem overwhelming, consider it as another ingredient in becoming an exemplary teacher.

FORMING FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS: SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

Perhaps the first step in becoming a responsive educator in connecting with the families of students is to reflect on beliefs about family engagement. Initially, an educator may experience feelings of ambivalence, fear, or shyness when confronted with the idea of collaborating with families. These feelings are natural for any educator, especially if the educator is not a parent. However, an important part of the job as an educator of children will involve partnering with families in the school community, and it is important to identify any attitudes that will be a barrier to effective family collaboration practices.
A New School Year Begins

Kate Harrison listened intently as her principal, Brenda Frasier, addressed the group of teachers at their first faculty meeting of the year. As a first-year teacher, Kate was excited to have a job teaching second grade at Kennedy Elementary School, but she was also nervous. She wanted to make this school year a special one for her second-graders, but as Mrs. Frasier described some of the new district and state requirements for teachers and students, she wondered if she’d be able to do everything that was required of her. One of the new mandates that Mrs. Frasier was describing was something called a District Family Engagement Plan:

“Our new Family Engagement Plan requires that we do more than what we’ve done in the past—an open house at the beginning of school, fall parent-teacher conferences, and monthly parent newsletters are not enough. We’re going to have to work at doing a better job of engaging our school’s families—and that means all families. You know that our Latino population is increasing, and we need to find ways to reach out to those parents who haven’t been very involved in our class activities. There are other groups that haven’t been involved—for example, how many fathers volunteered in our classrooms last year, especially those divorced dads who don’t have custody of their children? I want all of you to be thinking about how you’re going to do that in your classrooms, as well as how we can do a better job with family engagement as a school. I want us to move toward a more family-centered approach where we use the strengths of parents to help us educate their children. That will be the topic of our next faculty workday, and in the meantime, I’m going to ask you to work in subgroups to come up with some collaborative family engagement strategies for our different family types.”

Mrs. Frasier handed out assignments, and Kate looked at hers with trepidation. She and three other teachers were given the task of improving family engagement practices with the English Language Learner families in the district. Kate had little experience with students who did not speak English, much less their families. While she wanted to have good relationships with the families of her students, she was also a little afraid of what they might think of her, as an inexperienced teacher. She also couldn’t imagine how she was going to find time to do anything more than write a monthly parent newsletter, with trying to get lessons planned and papers graded. She sighed as she laid the paper to the side with the stack of other back-to-school tasks that the principal had given out.

You’ll note that the term “parent involvement” is not used in this text. Rather, family engagement is the terminology chosen to reflect the changing nature of the homes in which children reside, which may or may not include a parent or parents. A mutually collaborative, working relationship with the family serves the best interests of the student, in both the school and home settings, for the primary purpose of increasing student achievement (Epstein et al., 2002). It also denotes the rich contributions of individuals beyond parents, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings.
As this text title, *Home, School, and Community Collaboration*, suggests, a broader perspective than “parental connections” will be presented, demonstrating the “overlapping spheres of influence” that *school, family, and community partnerships*—a multidimensional concept that acknowledges that families, teachers, administrators, and community members jointly share the responsibility for students’ academic achievement and development—have on children’s education and development (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). The term “family engagement” has also replaced the familiar “family involvement” phrase. As Ferlazzo (2011) explained:

> We need to understand the differences between family *involvement* and family *engagement*. One of the dictionary definitions of *involve* is “to enfold or envelope,” whereas one of the meanings of *engage* is “to come together and interlock.” Thus, involvement implies doing to; in contrast, engagement implies doing with. (p. 11)

A true collaboration between school, home, and community requires active engagement of all those involved.

### Activity 1.1

Using the survey in Table 1.1, assess your beliefs about some of the basic premises of family engagement. Consider returning to this survey at the end of the course to determine your growth as a responsive family educator.

### BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

As you reflect on your present knowledge and skills relating to working with families, it is important to understand the benefits of a strong family engagement program, as well as barriers to its success. Research confirms that “educators need to know how to work with families and communities. . . . These competencies are required *every day of every teacher’s professional career* [italics added]” (Epstein, Sanders, & Clark, 1999, p. 29). The reciprocal benefits of family engagement are numerous—all constituents, including children, families, educators, and the school community, reap the positive rewards of increased family engagement.

#### Benefits for Students

Numerous research studies have confirmed the positive impact of family engagement on students from early childhood through high school. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) reviewed hundreds of studies, which overwhelmingly indicated that high-quality
Table 1.1  Family Engagement Attitude Survey

Directions: This survey presents an opportunity for self-reflection about some of the basic premises of family engagement. Read the following statements and indicate your level of acceptance of the statement by selecting option (a) completely, (b) somewhat, or (c) do not. Be honest in your self-assessment, and be prepared to provide your reasoning in rating the statement as you did.

a. Completely
b. Somewhat
c. Do not

As an educator preparing to work with families, I __

1. Acknowledge that the family remains the child's first teacher throughout the school years.
2. Recognize the potential of the home as a learning environment.
3. Believe in the strength of families and the ultimate resilience of the family unit.
4. Tend to judge families' abilities to be engaged with their child's education, based on their backgrounds, degree of education, socioeconomic status, or family structure.
5. Understand how cultural differences and beliefs affect families' attitudes about their role in their child's education.
6. Maintain an openness to communicate with families through a variety of methods, including technology.
7. Recognize the risk factors brought on by poverty, and I have knowledge of community resources and a willingness to refer families to the appropriate agencies.
8. Respect the decisions made by families concerning the academic future of their children (my students).
9. Welcome all my students' family members and acknowledge their family structure.
10. Empathize with the daily economic, personal, and psychological stresses in today's families.
11. Understand how cultural differences matter.
12. Complete this statement: “When I think about being a partner with my students’ families in their education, I feel . . .”

family engagement programs improve and support student achievement. Specifically, it was found that students whose families are engaged in their education in some way

- earn higher grades and test scores,
- are less likely to be retained in a grade,
are more apt to have an accurate diagnosis for educational placement in classes,
attend school regularly,
like school and adapt well to it,
have better social skills,
have fewer negative behavior reports, and
graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

A key finding of this research is the importance of encouraging families to support their children’s learning at home. Other researchers have found that family engagement may account for 10% to 20% of the variance in student achievement levels and that family engagement at the elementary level was a strong predictor of student achievement in urban schools (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). Family engagement appears to have a long-range effect as children progress through school, and the more families support their children’s learning, the better they do in school over time (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Benefits for Families
Family engagement can also have benefits for parents and guardians. Studies have found that families who are engaged in their children’s education tend to have more positive attitudes and be more satisfied with their child’s school and teachers, with fewer mistaken assumptions between families and teachers about one another’s attitudes, abilities, and motives. There is also an increase in families’ skills and confidence, sometimes even leading to improving their education. As families better understand the school’s structure and programs, they may move into more leadership roles in the school setting (Cotton & Wikelund, 2001). Family members may also gain a better understanding of their child’s skills, abilities, and development and learn how to handle parenting issues, such as discipline, nutrition, or how to help with homework (Diffily, 2004).

Benefits for Educators and Schools
Family engagement also benefits schools and school districts. Certainly, teachers benefit from the extra support and individualized attention that families can give their child, whether it is volunteering in the classroom or helping at home. School districts can benefit in a number of ways. For example, researchers have found that schools with highly rated partnership programs make greater gains on state tests than schools with lower-rated programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family engagement can help school districts achieve the standards required under the No Child Left Behind accountability movement. Other research has shown that school safety is increased with the presence of active family
and community members throughout a school's campus (Saunders, 1996). School districts may also benefit financially; families who approve of the schools that their children attend are more likely to support the school with votes for passage of school bond issues and educator raises, and they may be involved in grant-writing initiatives.

A note of caution about the benefits of traditional family engagement for educators and schools—it may be a benefit to teachers and schools, but have little benefit for families. For example, attending PTA/PTO meetings or school performances, volunteering clerical assistance, fundraising, or sending in school party treats may be quite helpful to teachers or districts, but they do little to authenticate a true partnership.

**BARRIERS TO AUTHENTIC FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

Although there are numerous benefits to family engagement, researchers have also identified barriers to authentic family engagement. The roadblocks may appear formidable, but the first step in overcoming them is to recognize school barriers (teachers and administrators), family barriers (individual or group), community barriers (district or school building), and programmatic barriers (families invited to partake in workshops or training) that hinder effective family engagement.

**School Barriers: Educators**

Despite research to the contrary, unfortunately, some teachers think that families are not valuable resources in educating students, and hence, they do not value or promote family engagement. Finding the time in a busy school day is also a major barrier for teachers (Lawson, 2003). Moreover, the lack of trust for parental motives or actions, or lack of respect for their life choices, can create a negative attitude for teachers toward family engagement (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Middle-class teachers tend especially to view low-income families negatively, in valuing their contributions or childrearing practices (Edwards & Young, 1990). They may also fear that family members will judge their teaching performance or gossip outside the classroom about the students’ abilities or behaviors. Teachers’ preferences for traditional school involvement such as volunteering, chaperoning field trips, or acting as a classroom parent to organize events may limit family engagement. This *school-centric approach*, which refers to traditional family involvement activities that are centered on meeting the teacher/school’s needs without regard to a family’s perspective or needs relating to their child’s education, may offer few opportunities for meaningful interactions and relationship building with families (Lawson, 2003). This approach may especially prohibit engagement with families with low education levels, living in poverty, or who do not speak English. A national survey of over 17,000 families found that less than half of families without a high school education or who did not speak English attended school events, compared to over 85% of educated families. Only 27% of poor families volunteered at school or served on school committees (Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2013).
Family Barriers: Individuals or Groups

In addition to educators’ and school districts’ practices, families may also have barriers that keep them from fully participating in their child’s education. As it is for teachers, time is one of the biggest roadblocks to family engagement. Whether it is a work schedule or a busy lifestyle, today's families often do not have discretionary time to devote to their child's education. Teachers may inadvertently make it more difficult for busy working families by only offering school engagement opportunities between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. on school days, with no flexibility or other options (Rich, 1998). For example, one study found that low-income working mothers or those who were attending school full-time required other means of engagement beyond the school day schedule (Weiss et al., 2005).

Adults who had negative personal school experiences may be anxious about entering a school they perceive as unwelcoming (Finders & Lewis, 1994). Direct conflicts with teachers (Lawson, 2003) or unhappiness over remarks made by teachers may cause families to avoid contact with teachers. A lack of family efficacy, or confidence in being able to help their child succeed in school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and the embarrassment associated with this struggle again may cause avoidance of classrooms.

All these issues will be addressed throughout this text in more detail. Although the barriers to effective family engagement seem many, creative, caring, and committed educators and families can find ways to surmount these obstacles.

School/District/Community Barriers

In today’s era of school security issues, many school campuses have a forbidding appearance for nonschool personnel, with locked doors and signs demanding that visitors report to the office, creating an actual physical barrier to families wishing to visit school. Lewis and Henderson (1997) noted that an unwelcoming school atmosphere may turn families away from venturing into a school. Policies such as not allowing younger siblings to come to school with a family volunteer or not permitting family members to volunteer in their child’s classroom can also be a barrier. In addition, with the new scrutiny imposed on schools to meet higher academic standards, school systems may close doors to parents, especially those who may be critical of teachers or school policies (Saunders, 2001). The size of the school can also be a barrier to family engagement. One study found that the increase in the size of a school led to a decrease in parental involvement (Walsh, 2010). A low priority of family engagement funding in high-poverty schools has been noted (Roza, 2005). Schools receiving funding under Title I must allocate a certain portion of Title I funds to developing family partnerships, but this money can be spent in other ways. School districts often bemoan a lack of positive and authentic opportunities for families to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Many times, restricted thinking on the part of the district concerning what is viewed as an acceptable contribution to the school effort is constraining for families wishing to be involved in other ways.

Schools may be well intentioned in developing family engagement activities, but they may fail to recognize that not all families may be able to participate in them. For example, many
elementary schools host family events, such as a Grandparents’ Day luncheon, a Mother’s Day tea, or a Father’s Day breakfast, which by nature will eliminate some children’s families from participating if they are not a two-parent family or if they do not have grandparents in the community. A family event that features a meal may eliminate some families whose culture or religion does not allow them to eat certain foods, and school holiday celebrations that honor the majority population holidays, while neglecting other cultural holidays, will exclude some cultural or religious minorities. Teachers may have children create Mother’s and Father’s Day gifts or complete projects, such as a family tree, which may be difficult for children who do not live with both parents or are adopted or foster children, as they may not have photos of themselves as babies or knowledge about their family heritage.

Activity 1.2

Table 1.2 has a list of common school activities. Which of these activities will exclude some students and their families from participating due to their family diversity, socioeconomic status, or language background? Explain how that can occur sometimes in schools. How can these activities be modified to include all families?

Barriers for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

A major barrier for families who are new immigrants or dual language learners (DLLs) includes the inability to understand the majority language of the school (Antunez, 2000; Collier & Auerbach, 2011). Furthermore, some cultural traditions (or simply some parents) believe that the role of the teacher is to educate the child (Kim, 2002) and that the family’s role is to rear the child, not to be directly involved in educational practices. Olivos (2009) and Salas (2004) explore potential barriers for culturally and linguistically diverse families who have a special-needs child. These include the following:

- The asymmetries of power that can take the form of explicit and implicit discouragement by educators
- Educators fluent in legal discourse of special education laws versus parents lacking that knowledge
- Parental feelings of alienation and disrespect from educators that result in disengagement, avoidance, and anger
- Parental opinions discounted in feeling their “voices were not heard”

Chapter 5, “Culturally Diverse Families,” explores in great detail the benefits and barriers of culturally responsive family engagement and nurturing educators who support this model of collaboration with families.
Although all schools face roadblocks to effective family engagement, Table 1.3 compares and contrasts the findings from recent research on the differing barriers in urban, rural, and suburban schools.

### The Administrator as a Responsive Leader

From the activities described thus far, a supportive administrator is key to the success of schoolwide family engagement practices. Research substantiates the powerful impact a principal or assistant principal committed to family engagement can have on school
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>School Barriers</th>
<th>Family Barriers</th>
<th>Community Barriers</th>
<th>Programmatic Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inappropriate teacher and school secretary attitudes</td>
<td>Participant disinterest</td>
<td>Unmet physical and safety needs</td>
<td>Misconceptions about purpose of parental program</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Gender-specific exclusion (males)</td>
<td>Unsafe communities, school security issues: locked access</td>
<td>Babysitting costs; children not invited</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fear of confrontations</td>
<td>Feelings of intimidation/ inadequacy</td>
<td>Scheduling problems: lack of facilities/ community resources</td>
<td>Too many meetings offered, “less is more”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of understanding cultural differences</td>
<td>Prior negative school experiences</td>
<td>Catastrophic school closure: for example, New Orleans/Katrina</td>
<td>Fear of getting in trouble with spouse for attending meeting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Few translators or bilingual teachers</td>
<td>Families’ past social interactions with school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methods of contact unsuccessful</td>
<td>Parental occupation/time limitations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child care and transportation issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Itinerant teachers travel to various schools</td>
<td>Lack of awareness of importance of activities</td>
<td>Rural communities: working poor live just above poverty line</td>
<td>Transportation costs for program attendance</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negative impression of program based on comments of other families</td>
<td>Out-migration for employment</td>
<td>Learning is “threatening”; fear of attending because of limited literacy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Persistent poverty: lack of money for anything but basic needs</td>
<td>Geography: consolidated rural schools many miles from students’ homes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Weather impediments in areas with limited services</td>
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### Partnership Barriers

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Suburban</th>
<th>School Barriers</th>
<th>Family Barriers</th>
<th>Community Barriers</th>
<th>Programmatic Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School visitation notification 24 hours in advance</td>
<td>Helicopter parents: over-involvement</td>
<td>School reassignment can cause travel constraints</td>
<td>School environment too sterile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents not allowed to visit first week of school</td>
<td>Divorced parents: access to records; who attends teacher meetings?</td>
<td>Lack of access: Internet-based school websites</td>
<td>Lack of visual aids and colorful teaching material</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusionary and political views of curriculum</td>
<td>Parental privacy concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td>Competing family demands</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Grapevine” comments judging parents’ lifestyles</td>
<td>Children misbehaving when parent involved in school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs focused on biological parents, not extended families</td>
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</table>

**Sources:** Farrell & Collier (2010); McBride, Bae, & Blatchford (2002); Olivos (2009); Wanat (2010).

Partnership programs in numerous ways (Davies, 2002; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2005). Without an effective administrator spearheading organized efforts toward family engagement, teachers who are at first enthusiastic about including families in all aspects of school planning and engagement often get discouraged. As one study found,

> Principals have the power to motivate and mobilize school personnel for specific purposes and hold the purse strings for specific initiatives. Principals hold the key to initiating programs and processes. They can enlist school community support, earmark funds for specific priorities, and provide time for teams of teachers, parents, and community members to meet, plan, and evaluate their family involvement actions. When principals fail to support partnership efforts, teachers may abandon their focus on partnerships and shift their energies elsewhere. (Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2005, p. 56)

As the ultimate host of a school, the principal must ensure that families entering the school experience a welcoming and positive atmosphere, from the friendliness of the school secretary to helpful signs in multiple languages. A principal’s vision or motto for family engagement in her school should be evident to families who come there.
As a family adviser, a principal’s ability to effectively communicate her vision through different modes is crucial. As an instructional leader, a savvy administrator should push teachers to connect their teaching with learning at home and to work with families on issues, including family literacy, home extension activities, and learning challenges.

Moreover, a principal should function as an advocate for families, in part by establishing an information base at the school with up-to-date information about state, district, and community resources available to support families. In addition, the administrator must maintain a deep understanding of the diverse cultures within the community. He should know when to ask resource personnel for translations of important documents and when to consult cultural guides to the community. Finally, as the school’s business broker, the principal should be instrumental in collaboration with a school team in seeking school-business partnerships tied to community needs. Figure 1.1 presents a model of the roles that effective family engagement administrators assume.

A school administrator must also take the lead on communicating with families through a variety of methods. While newsletters and school handbooks can provide basic information for families, administrators committed to family engagement will go beyond these methods to build relationships with families through face-to-face and phone conversations, and a variety of technological tools like e-mail, interactive websites, Skype, Twitter, or online parent education meetings (Mazza, 2013).

As Joe Mazza, the principal at Knapp Elementary School in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, stated, a strong family engagement program will not occur without administrator support:

As a principal, or lead learner, I see myself as the family engagement “deal breaker” at my school.

Unless I’m the one that’s expecting it, modeling it, creating opportunities for families to engage, providing time and training for my staff and trying to be the bridge between home and school, family engagement just isn’t going to get done because it’s not yet at the priority level of something like standardized tests—that is, something that “has to happen.” (Mazza, 2013, para. 1)

CURRENT TRENDS IN FAMILY DEMOGRAPHICS

Prior to effectively dealing with barriers to a family engagement program, it is important to have a better understanding of the families of the students in today’s classrooms. American families are not easy to define or track because of the changing nature of families and differences in definitions of family. Although the U.S. Census Bureau (2013b) defines a family as “two or more people (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption residing in the same housing unit” (pg. 1), the reality in today’s American families is that there is a wide range of possibilities:
Children living in two-parent, married families who may be opposite sex or same-sex parents

Blended families where one parent is a stepparent

Children living with two adults both acting as parents but who are not married (and may be opposite-sex or same-sex partners) and, therefore, defined as a single-parent household
Children living in households with grandparents or other relatives

Children in foster-care situations

One study of the Woodlawn community in Chicago found that first-graders had 86 different combinations of adults living in households and 35 different family configurations (Demo & Cox, 2000). Therefore, the labeling of students’ family types must be carefully considered.

However, the U.S. Census Bureau (2013a) provides a snapshot of today’s families through data that are gathered annually in the American Community Survey, as well as the data that are collected every 10 years in the Census. Data are gathered on households and families related to number of families, type and size of families, age of children, type of housing, income, and race/ethnicity. In addition, Columbia University’s National Center for Children in Poverty currently provides fact sheets on poverty in the United States.

Configuration of Today’s American Families

TRADITIONAL FAMILY CONFIGURATIONS In 2012, the majority of children (64%) lived with two married parents, although this may include a number of options, such as a biological mother and father, adoptive parents, a biological parent and a stepparent, or grandparents who were serving as parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). Due to the change in state laws concerning same-sex marriage, the Census Bureau began collecting data on same-sex married couples in 2010. The 2011 American Community Survey found 16% of same-sex households included children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013c).

NONTRADITIONAL FAMILY CONFIGURATIONS It should be noted that these statistics do not include the nonfamily groups, such as single adults or adults who are unrelated but living together without children. Approximately 33% of all households fit this type. It should also be noted that while children may be living with a single parent, this parent may be cohabiting with another adult and, in essence, providing a two-parent household.

SINGLE MOTHER/FATHER FAMILIES Single-mother families have increased from 3.4 million in 1970 to 10 million in 2012, while single-father families have grown from half a million to 2 million. In 2012, 24% of children lived only with their mother, while 4% of children lived only with their father. Single mothers were the heads of 29% of black households. At the same time, the percentage of two-parent families has decreased from 77% in 1980 to 64% in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b).
Figure 1.2 provides more detailed information about the complexity of family types, including the presence of a cohabiting parent, which increased the percentage of two-biological/adoptive parent homes to 68% and single-parent homes to 28%.

**MARRIAGE AGES AND BIRTH RATES** American adults are also marrying later. In 2010, the average ages for men and women to marry were 28.7 and 26.5 years, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2011). This increased from 22.8 and 20.3 years, respectively, since 1950 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). American parents are choosing to have fewer children as well. There has been a downward trend in household and family size since the beginning of the century. In 2012, families had, on average, 2.6 children, down from 3.1 children in 1970 (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2012). Figure 1.3 shows the trend of smaller households from 1970 to 2012.

**TEEN AND UNMARRIED BIRTH RATES** The 2012 birth rates for teenagers ages 15 to 19 was 29.4 births per 1,000, a historic low, declining 6% from 2011 to 2012 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013b). Preliminary 2010 data showed a decline in overall teenage childbearing. Teenage births have declined 44% since 1991 across all races and ethnicities. However, the births to unmarried women of all ages have remained unchanged at 40.7% of all U.S. births since 2011 (CDC, 2013b). Almost half of women having their first babies were unmarried in 2010, and almost 75% of women having their first child in their early twenties were not married (ChildStats.Gov, 2013). Figure 1.4 shows the trends in the ages of unmarried women having babies.

**DIVORCE** A growing debate exists about the divorce rate of American marriages. It has been widely reported that approximately one in two marriages will end in divorce based

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**Figure 1.2  Today's Families in the United States: 2012**


1 Includes children living with two stepparents.
Figure 1.3 U.S. Household Size, 1970 to 2012


Figure 1.4 Changing Trends in Age at Birth of Unmarried Mothers, 1980–2011

on the marriage and divorce statistics of each year. For example, in 2011, the National Vital Statistics System reported that there were 6.8 marriages and 3.6 divorces per 1,000 people, which is a divorce rate of approximately 52.9% (CDC, 2013a). However, a recent U.S. Census Bureau report (Kreider & Ellis, 2011) found that determining the divorce rate is more complicated than just comparing the number of marriages to the number of divorces in any given year. Divorce rates differ according to factors such as the length of the marriage and race. For example, divorces were more likely to occur in the first 10 years of marriage, with the median length of a first marriage as eight years. Divorce rates were also lower in 2009 for Asian American and Hispanic women, with 22% of Asian American and 34% of Hispanic women's first-time marriages ending in divorce, compared to 41% of white women and 49% of black women. Experts do agree that divorce rates, which rose sharply in the 1970s and the 1980s, leveled off and slightly declined in the 1990s, with that trend continuing in 2009 (Hurley, 2005; Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

**Remarriage** Divorces and remarriages that involve children often occur when children are in early childhood or elementary school years. In 2009, the average age at which a divorce occurred was 30 for women and 32 for men. For divorced adults who went on to remarry, the average amount of time between the end of the first marriage and the second marriage was 3.8 years for men and 3.7 years for women (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

**Grandparent Caregivers** Another significant trend in today's families is the increase of grandparents raising their grandchildren, known as *grandfamilies* (Goyer, 2011). In 2012, 2.0% of all children (1.5 million) were living in grandparent-led households. Another 570,000 children were living with other relatives, in what is labeled *kinship care* (ChildStats.Gov, 2013). Clearly, there is not one typical type of family in today's American society.

**Economic Status of Today's American Families**

Responsive educators recognize that child poverty in America affects educational opportunities, child health, and social growth and development for children whose families experience poverty. Hardships suffered by children include food insecurity, lack of affordable housing and health insurance, and difficult daily economic struggles. Persistent or deep poverty is even more debilitating and defeating for families.

Family poverty appears to impact the following:

- A greater percentage of African American (65%) and Latino children (65%)
- Children of immigrants; 63% live in poverty
- Young children; 48% of children younger than six live in poverty
- Southern states, as they exhibit the highest levels of extreme child poverty (48%) (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2013)
Child poverty is defined as children who live in families below the federal poverty level (FPL), which in 2012 was $23,050 for a family of four. However, extreme child poverty is defined as children living in families with incomes below half the FPL. In 2012, 9.7% of children or more than 7 million children lived in extreme poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Being employed does not protect families from poverty, as almost two-thirds of families living in poverty in 2012 had at least one adult who was working. Single-parent families were more likely to be poor; 56.1% of poor children lived with a single mother, and 8.6% of poor children lived with single fathers (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Poverty rates also vary by race, ethnicity, and geographical regions. While 31% of white children lived in poor families in 2011, the number increased for children who were African American (65%), American Indian (63%), or Hispanic (65%).

Children in immigrant families had higher rates of poverty, as did those living in rural areas or the southern states (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013). Figures 1.5 and 1.6 display the status of children living in poverty in the United States.

![Figure 1.5](https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL33069.pdf)

**Figure 1.5 Families With Children Younger Than 18 Below the Poverty Level, 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Alone, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian Alone</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All families</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married-couple families</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male householder, no wife present</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female householder, no husband present</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the society of the United States becomes more diverse, American families are also increasingly diverse in race and ethnicity. The Census Bureau predicts that while family size will decrease, family diversity will increase. Latino and Asian American families are projected to show the most growth, while the percentage of white families will decrease. In 2012, white non-Hispanics represented the majority population at 63%. However, by 2060, the Census Bureau projects that the combined minority population will be larger than the majority, white non-Hispanic population, with minorities making up 57% of the U.S. population. It is projected that almost one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic by 2060, compared to almost one in six in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012c). The Census Bureau had projected that the population of minority children would be larger than the white majority by 2023, but because of the rapid increase of Latino families, this is now projected to occur by 2019 (Tavernise, 2011).

**Figure 1.6 United States: Child Poverty and Race, 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>4,782,000</td>
<td>4,201,000</td>
<td>5,976,000</td>
<td>497,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under Five</td>
<td>1,425,000</td>
<td>1,274,000</td>
<td>1,898,000</td>
<td>126,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Addy, Englehardt, & Skinner (2013).

**Race and Ethnicity of Today’s American Families**

Multiracial families make up the fastest growing demographic group in the United States.
Figure 1.7  U.S. Population by Race, 2012 and 2060


Activity 1.3

The chart in Table 1.4 offers you the chance to describe both your family of origin and what you perceive to be the “ideal,” in family practices, beliefs, and values. Where are they similar? Where are they different? With a partner, discuss your ideas. Do you think that there is more than one way to “do family”? How will your vision of the ideal family influence your interactions with the families of students in your classroom, especially those who are different from either your family experience or your ideal family? Completing this activity may help you better understand not only the influence of your family but also how diverse family backgrounds have a major impact on the students in your classroom.

An increase in biracial and multiracial children and families is also being seen (See Figure 1.7). U.S. Census Bureau respondents were first able to identify themselves as belonging to “two or more races” or “some other race alone” in 2010. Multiracial families make up the fastest-growing demographic in the United States, with a 32% increase from 2000 to 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012d). Approximately 9% of the U.S. population is
multiracial, and it is estimated that the numbers will climb to 21% by 2050 (Brown, 2009, p. 124). Interracial couples are more likely to be younger than older, with 10% of women under the age of 45 in interracial marriages, compared to 4% of women older than 55 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). A difference among family types has also emerged. Although white, Asian, and Latino families are more likely to be headed by married couples, the percentage decreases for black families, with 55% of these households headed by a single parent (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2012).

**Summary of Demographic Information**
An examination of current demographic data indicates the following trends:

- There are more single-parent households because of the choice to raise children alone, divorce, or cohabitation with another adult.
- Couples are choosing to marry later in life.
- Families and households are getting smaller.
- More grandparents are raising their grandchildren.
- The number of states that allow same-sex marriages is increasing, allowing the Census Bureau to report data on same-sex married households with children for the first time in 2010.
- There has been a decline in teenage births but an increase in births to unmarried mothers.
- The divorce rate has leveled off between 40% and 50%, depending on how the statistics are examined.
- Both parents are likely to work; moreover, most low-income parents are employed.
- Single-parent households are more likely to be below the poverty line than married-couple households.
- Families are more diverse in both structure and race, and the population of children is rapidly growing more racially diverse. Latinos are the fastest-growing minority in the United States, followed by Asians.
- There is an increase in biracial and multiracial children and families.

**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

With the family demographics in mind, it is clear that today’s classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in family structure, culture, race, and socioeconomic status, as well
as in other respects, such as religion or sexual orientation. Within the different cultural and racial groups, there is much diversity as well. For example, an Asian child could be Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and so on. Each of these cultures potentially represents different beliefs about education, parenting practices, religions, communication styles, and family values. The number of children who come from homes where English is not the native language is also increasing. U.S. schools have seen a dramatic rise in English Language Learners (ELLs), with 10% or 4.7 million ELL children in U.S. schools in 2010–2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). This growth in non-English-speaking families presents unique challenges to today’s teachers in communication with children and families.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Gay (2002) proposed that culturally responsive teaching (CRT) provides the best-quality education for diverse students. A culturally responsive teacher uses students’ “cultural orientations, background experiences, ethnic identities as conduits to facilitate their learning” (p. 614). This requires that teachers first understand the influence of family experiences, race, culture, and ethnicity on learning, including becoming “critically conscious” of their cultural backgrounds and how these affect their attitudes about children and families that are different from theirs. As a responsive educator, it is important to recognize the influence of personal family experiences, which now provide the lens through which educators look at their students’ families and develop CRT strategies. Researchers suggest that these strategies should include developing caring relationships with students, establishing warm, yet demanding classroom climates, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.4 The Ideal Family and Your Family: Are They the Same?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Briefly describe your family of origin in the different categories and then describe your vision of the “ideal family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Family</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical family activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mealtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood chores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family celebrations/holidays/birthdays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with extended family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family transitions (i.e., moves, parents changing jobs, deaths, divorce, new babies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of family involvement in children’s education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family values and goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fostering collaboration and social relationships among students. Other strategies include becoming familiar with students’ verbal and nonverbal communication styles, providing language support, and developing classroom activities, using a variety of teaching strategies, including appropriate assessments, that reflect students’ needs (Bae & Clark, 2005; Brown, 2003; Gay, 2000, 2002).

Therefore, it will not be enough only to focus on teaching strategies that are culturally responsive. Since children cannot be isolated from their home, community, or cultural settings, an educator will also need to use family engagement strategies that are responsive to the families’ cultural and community backgrounds. Students will be most successful in their education when there is continuity between home and school. When teachers are supportive of families and communicate in ways that are appropriate for each family’s culture, better educational outcomes are seen in children (Keyes, 2002; Poveda & Martin, 2004). The teacher considers the family’s perspective in developing family engagement practices and individualizes strategies to meet the needs of diverse family types (Ray, 2005).

This can be difficult for teachers when working with children and families from cultures different from their own. For example, if the educators have never experienced extreme poverty, how can they relate to a family who is homeless? If a teacher has been raised in a Christian background, how can one be sensitive to the beliefs and values of students’ parents or guardians who may come from a Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or no faith background? If English is the only language that is spoken, how can an educator communicate effectively with the family of a Japanese, Bosnian, or Mexican student who speaks little or no English? Because the majority of early childhood and elementary education teachers are females from a European American, white, middle-class, monolingual background, they may know little about the beliefs, values, and behaviors of children from cultures that are different from this majority perspective (Gay, 2002). This textbook will examine all facets of family engagement from a culturally responsive approach.

**ETHICAL PRACTICE**

A final note about having effective family engagement practices that are culturally responsive includes understanding how to work with families in ethically and morally responsible ways. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides guidance for educators of children of all ages in working ethically with children, families, and colleagues in the *Code of Ethical Conduct* (NAEYC, 2005). In particular, Section II addresses the ethical responsibilities that teachers have to families. These include being responsible for communicating, cooperating, and collaborating with families in ways that will support children’s learning and development. An ethical teacher welcomes and encourages families to be involved in their child’s education and collaborates with them on making significant decisions about their child. Collaboration also means listening to families, acknowledging their strengths, and learning from them about how to best educate their child. This involves respecting their culture, language, customs, and beliefs. In turn, teachers can help families understand the educational program and enhance their ability to support their child’s learning and development. Ethical practice also means that teachers treat information about children and families...
with confidentiality and respect families’ right to privacy relating to family matters. Families also have the right to be fully informed about anything that occurs at school relating to their child’s cognitive, physical, social, or emotional development.

A complete list of the Code of Ethical Conduct Ideals and Principles relating to families is provided in Appendix B.

SUMMARY

Becoming an exemplary teacher with effective home and school collaboration practices is a lifelong task that requires myriad skills and dispositions, such as commitment, creativity, understanding, respect, and communication. Recognizing the benefits of strong family engagement can help an educator become committed to the work involved in achieving this, and being creative in removing the barriers that present roadblocks to efforts may help you be more successful. Understanding the demographics of the families of students, having respect for their differences, and using culturally responsive family engagement strategies and ethical practices will make the task easier. Developing a variety of warm, friendly communication strategies is an important part of the process. As a responsive educator, this may all seem a daunting task, but consider the following commonsense advice from a working mother who coordinates a family resource center as a family outreach specialist in a Western state:

It is really important for teachers to know how to make a good impression, a friendly impression right off the bat. They have to lay it out, “here’s how you communicate with me, here’s my phone number, here’s my e-mail address, this is a great time to call me because I have recess.” So the parent feels welcomed, so they don’t have to wait for a problem when they are nervous about approaching the teacher. Be very approachable, that is what I am trying to say. (Grant, 2002, p. 106)

The vast majority of students’ families want their children to achieve and to have a positive relationship with you. It will be up to you to help achieve that goal.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Reread the In the Classroom case study presented at the beginning of the chapter, and reflect on these questions:

1. What do you think it means to have a family-centered approach where teachers “use the strengths of parents to help educate their children”?

2. What demographics will be important for the teachers at Kennedy Elementary to consider in creating their district’s Family Engagement Plan?

3. What ideas might Kate take to her first meeting about ways to work effectively with the families of the English Language Learner students in the districts?
Culture is deeper than typical understanding of ethnicity, race, and/or faith. It includes notions of differences and similarities, and is seen in students’ identities and their way of being in the world. A first step in getting to understand your students begins with knowledge; if you would like more information on world cultures, go to: http://www.everyculture.com/. This site has comprehensive information on more than 100 cultures in America and around the world. Cultures are organized by alphabetical order.

Forming family partnerships and family engagement may be difficult. Becoming a culturally responsive teacher requires using students’ cultural background experiences, ethnic identities, and orientations to facilitate learning. To do this, knowledge is key; here is an app to assist:

- **World Cultures Gallery Guide**—free for iPad. This app features cultural themes such as adornments, beliefs, foodways, home and family, objects made, rituals, status and power, and transportation.

The United States is extremely diverse, as are the families who live there. In a TED Talks video entitled “Color Blind or Color Brave?,” finance executive Mellody Hobson talks about embracing race and diversity.

https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave

Engaging Diverse Families, maintained by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), http://www.naeyc.org/families/PT

This website provides excellent strategies to increase family engagement through links to family-based documents and resources and profiles of 10 exemplary programs.
Family and Community, maintained by North Central Regional Education Laboratory, www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/pa0cont.htm

This website is an excellent source for strategies, advice, and support for improving family involvement in the classroom; the site also provides additional resources, through links, for subject integration, educational software, and links for parents.


This website provides excellent strategies to increase family involvement; detailed examples of successful schools that have undergone extensive transformations to form partnerships with families are highlighted. It also has contact information for both resource centers and regional assistance centers.

National Center for Children in Poverty, maintained by the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, http://www.nccp.org

This website contains a multitude of facts, maps, and reports on child and family poverty in the United States.

**STUDENT STUDY SITE**

Log on to the student study site at study.sagepub.com/grant3e for additional study tools, including the following:

- eFlashcards
- Web quizzes
- Video and Web resources
- SAGE journal articles