



MAKING FAMILIES FEEL WELCOME

"A smile is the universal welcome."

—Max Eastman

OVERVIEW

A research-based list of methods for helping families of all backgrounds feel welcome in the school community

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year, but especially at the beginning of the year to create a safe and welcoming school environment for families

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 5 minutes

LEVEL

- Pre-K & Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- None

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Staff will:

- Engage in simple practices that help families of all backgrounds feel welcome in the school

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think of a time when you first entered an environment where you didn't know anyone or weren't sure what to do, but someone reached out to help you feel welcome. How did that feel? Did it change the way you saw the environment, or how you engaged with the people? If so, how?
- What are you and your staff members' reasons for doing this practice? How do you think it will benefit students and their families? Would they agree with you?
- Does this practice privilege your values over those of your staff or families in any way? For example, do some staff members feel that families should have little say in their children's education?
- If students' families come from a different background than you and/or your staff, how might everyone learn more about their background in order to better connect with them?
- Reflect on whether you and/or your staff might hold any unconscious biases around race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, gender, or other forms of diversity, toward students and their families.
 - This [article](#) by John A. Powell provides strategies for removing these biases.

INSTRUCTIONS

To help families feel welcome at your school, use the below list (derived from a large group of diverse parents and caregivers across five school districts) as a springboard for discussion with teachers and staff.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND WELCOMING INTERACTIONS FROM STAFF, TEACHERS, AND LEADERS

- **Front office staff:**
 - Be friendly and smile--greet parents when they enter the office.

- Offer your knowledge and assistance when families are navigating a new school.
- When families have questions and concerns, make the effort to respond in a timely fashion.
- To make the registration process for families easier and faster, respond to their needs and questions quickly. Create a process that is clear and easy to follow, prepare forms ahead of time, and check for completeness when forms are submitted.
- **Teachers:**
 - When families ask teachers for specific information and support pertaining to students' academic and socioemotional needs, they greatly appreciate educators who:
 - Put in extra effort and time to answer their questions
 - Are quick to respond to families' concerns
 - Are friendly in their interactions with family members
- **School Leaders:**
 - Invest time in getting to know students & families. For example, wait outside to greet children in the morning, learn the names of members of the community, and be physically present in the building.
 - Always welcome and greet students and parents to set the emotional tone of the day and cement relationships.

WELCOMING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

- Hold events that acknowledge diverse groups.
- Offer support for families and students whose first language is not English, for example, an interpreter and/or translated materials.
- For military families:
 - Recognize that children may attend between six and nine schools throughout their education-- three times as many as their peers.
 - Show patience and compassion for children whose parent/caregiver is deployed.
 - Acknowledge & appropriately address the emotional struggle that military students face when a parent/caregiver is deployed or returns home.

WELCOMING AND SUPPORTING FAMILIES WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

- **Teachers:**
 - Welcome families and their children with warmth
 - Communicate often with caregivers
 - Be open to discussing questions and concerns
 - Treat the children with respect and kindness
- **Schools:**
 - Advocate for the child's needs and make them a priority
 - Create a truly inclusive environment for special needs children
 - Follow through on IEP accommodations

ONGOING WELCOMING, INTEGRATION, AND SUPPORT

- Hold events and activities throughout the school year that are designed to integrate students and families into the school community, such as:
 - New student orientations
 - Back-to-school night and/or Fall Carnival, where families can meet other families
- Engage families in conversation and encourage their participation
 - Principals:
 - Hold weekly or monthly parent and caregiver meetings to answer questions and address concerns
 - Encourage family participation in the PTA
 - Develop and keep updated a school website and/or Facebook page
 - Teachers:
 - Send regular emails to keep families informed of what's going on in class and what students are studying
 - Encourage parent and caregiver involvement in the classroom
- Instill school spirit and community
 - Welcome families into the community through visible signs, community rituals, and participation in school holiday celebrations
- Address bullying
 - Respect families' complaints and concerns about bullying
 - Create protocols to deal with bullying and share them with the school community so that students, families, and staff have a common understanding of when to take action and what behaviors will not be tolerated

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What worked or didn't work for you and your staff in doing this practice? Would you change anything for next time?
- Do you notice whether families are engaging more with staff members, offering input, and attending more school events?
- To what extent have you reached out to families to learn about their experience with this practice? What did you learn from them? What worked well? What could be better?
- How did you and your staff make an effort to better understand the background(s) and/or experiences of students' families?
- Did you uncover any unconscious biases about families? If so, how are you beginning to transform them?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) of over 1,000 diverse preK through 12th grade parents and caregivers across five school districts asked what schools had done to make them feel welcome and unwelcome.

Responses showed that there are specific actions that schools can take to welcome families, including improving the positive attitude of school employees, simplifying the school registration process, offering welcoming activities, providing opportunities for special needs students, taking action against bullying, recognizing the needs of military families, and appreciating diversity.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers, and schools and teachers can benefit tremendously from their insight into a student's needs, interests, habits, etc. In addition, research shows that parental involvement in schools boosts students' [academic](#) and [social-emotional outcomes](#), and improves the school climate overall.

Yet, oftentimes parents and caregivers need to know that their insight and help are needed and wanted by schools, especially if they come from backgrounds that do not match the dominant culture of the school. Thus, it is up to the schools to make the effort to reach out and welcome parents into what can be a robust and fruitful partnership.

As the research demonstrates, there are many ways for schools to encourage family involvement--and sometimes all it takes is a friendly smile to welcome them in.

SOURCE

Siegel, A., Esqueda, M., Berkowitz, R., Sullivan, K., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2019). Welcoming parents to their child's school: Practices supporting students with diverse needs and backgrounds. *Education and Urban Society*, 51(6), 756-784.