



*fka*CS Information Sheet: Barriers to Active Participation in Early Childhood Education & Care

People face all sorts of barriers when accessing an early childhood education and care (ECEC) service. In particular children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face attitudinal barriers which may include but are not limited to:

Awareness and access barriers

- Unaware that the service is available to all children and families
- Unable to access information about the organisation or information is not available where the community needs it to be
- Information is not available in community language (or not the right community language)
- Inappropriate promotional material (material does not reflect the cultural norms of the community)
- Inappropriate images included in promotional material
- The use of technical language that is difficult to translate or determine meaning from

Communication and language barriers

- Being unable to communicate with educators without the need for an interpreter, family or friends reduces the spontaneity of conversations
- May not be able to initiate conversations and therefore rely on educators to be tuned in to the family and child
- Feeling uncomfortable communicating with limited English
- Documents provided in English only
- Difference in meaning for common words and/or technical information
- Cultural misconceptions and stereotypes
- Early childhood education as a western construct can differ from other cultures understanding of education in the early years

Structural barriers

- Lack of organisational understanding of cultural difference
- Staff all drawn from the same ethno-social group
- Decision making that presupposes a particular ethno-social background
- Timing of meetings and activities

- Service delivery does not align with communities expectations
- Policies, procedures and curriculum decision making that does not recognise or value cultural identity

Trust/respect and identity barriers

- Personal experience in home country (for example some families may have experienced cultural oppression)
- Fear of being judged or labelled
- Concerns about confidentiality (in particular when family or close community members are used as interpreters)
- Can perceive a lack of respect and value of the child's cultural identity from practitioners, educators and decision makers
- Having a minority status can lead to low confidence when values and beliefs are considered inferior and behaviours are ignored or ridiculed

Active/inactive prejudice or discrimination

- Negative community experiences such as systemic bias and/or racism can lead to social isolation which in turn can create a cycle of mistrust
- Practitioners relying on specific information about a particular ethnic group can lead to unintentional stereotyping

Barriers service providers, practitioners and educators perceive or experience

- Lack of awareness or confidence to address the needs of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Inability to communicate with families and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Practice that is not culturally sensitive, respectful or appropriate
- Lack of adequate resources
- Unconscious bias or fear of difference

Reducing Barriers to Active Participation

There are many ways service providers, practitioners and educators can reduce barriers to active participation for families and children. To meaningfully reduce barriers strategies must be implemented at the:

- Practitioner/educator level
- Service level
- Policy and procedural level

A cultural inclusion strategy may help to identify and remove barriers for children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A true recognition and respect for languages other than English is of prime importance as home language plays a significant role in shaping each child's identity.

However a culturally diverse workforce is not sufficient. Simply having a worker to speak the child's language does not necessarily ensure active participation for children and families.

Attitudes towards difference are identified as a major barrier to successful inclusion. Exploring differences in values and respecting different life choices is essential. Inclusion will not be achieved through token or surface gestures but through a way of working and thinking.

Service providers, practitioners and educators need to:

- Embrace the principles of respect for diversity and address attitudes and values by instituting a policy of openness and a positive attitude towards diversity
- Reflect on their attitude towards inclusion – ask yourself, is it about supporting minorities to assimilate and comply with the services expectations and understandings? Or is it about valuing and celebrating diversity?
- Implement family centred practice across the service in recognition that family is the first and most important educator
- Communicate and reflect on cultural expectations of each child and family rather than gathering information about specific cultures
- Employ or access bilingual staff that reflect the community remembering that migrants from the same country are not a uniform group
- Acknowledge that there will be nuances in language, faith, customs and cultural norms across ethnic groups
- Recognise the critical leadership roles that are inherent in local communities through informal networking
- Recognise every child's right to education and care that supports their identity, wellbeing and belonging
- Review policy, procedures and curriculum – attitudes towards difference are reinforced by services policy, procedures and curriculum decisions.

References / Further Reading

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fka Children's Services Cultural Competency Continuum adapted from Terry L. Cross et.al. 1989.