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Empowering Diverse Families

Abstract

The purpose of this article is twofold. One, we demonstrate a family empowerment model for serving diverse families to support the DEC and NAEYC Families standards. Two, we provide strategies for early childhood practitioners to empower diverse families in identifying family concerns, priorities, and resources. Additionally, we discuss ways to effectively communicate with families within culturally responsive contexts. In conclusion, we provide resources and illustrate how to effectively communicate and collaborate with families, with the ultimate goal of improving child outcomes and family functioning.

Keywords: families, family empowerment, diversity, early childhood

Meet the Families: *The Wilson Family*- *Mrs. Wilson is a professor at a large urban university. She and her husband both grew up in middle/upper middle class, African American families. The Wilson family has a daughter named Lily who was born with developmental delays. When asked about her experiences with Early Intervention (EI) Mrs. Wilson stated: "When the chief resident told me I would need to deliver my baby girl at just 26 weeks gestation, I was terrified. I did not begin to consider the different obstacles she might face growing up. As the months passed with Lily in the NICU and after talking to many experts, I began to realize that our journey would not be one that ended when she was finally released from the hospital three months later, it would be a journey we could possibly be on for the rest of her life. The social worker at the hospital explained to me the services that would be available to Lily through EI. I felt a little deflated; we were about to bring our child home, but chances are she would still be under the care of several specialists. After all the reading I had been doing in the NICU, I still don't think I was fully aware of the scope of help she would need. When talking with Patricia, our EI Service Cordinator, she asked us what we wanted to set up for milestone achievements for our baby. I was taken back. She was the expert; shouldn't she be telling us about what our daughter should be doing at a specific age? It was all very overwhelming."*

The Ruiz Family- *Mr. and Mrs. Ruiz both have a high school diploma and Mr. Ruiz works for a plumbing company. Mrs. Ruiz is an Irish-Polish descendant and grew up in a rural community in a family of 7 children. Her husband is a first-generation immigrant from Peru, but he grew up in New York City. The Ruiz family has a son named Carson who recently started attending an Early Childhood center. When asked about her experiences Mrs. Ruiz stated: "Carson is my only child. When Carson was 18 months, his teacher stated that Carson might be 'delayed,' I was shocked and hurt. Carson was using a few words, "mama" and "dada;" but he did seem to ignore me when I would speak to him, he won't play with other kids on the playground, and he threw tantrums a lot. But, I still didn't think that he was different than other children his age. I was confused by what the teacher was saying and didn't know what to do. The teacher helped me get in touch with EI so that Carson could get the help he needed. The EI service coordinator told me that a developmental specialist (DS) would come to our home and Carson's school. I was nervous to have strangers in our home and I didn't know what they would think of my family and home. I was also worried about how we would pay the DS because we were struggling to pay for Carson's EC center. When the DS came to my apartment, she said that she was going to help me learn how to help Carson, but I didn't understand, wasn't that her job? I just wanted Carson to talk, make friends, and be normal."*

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These vignettes illustrate two diverse American families and the ways in which diversity can manifest in unique ways. To ensure Early Childhood (EC) professionals are following effective early childhood practices, it is essential that all professionals collaborate with all families through a family-centered approach (Fults & Harry, 2012; Hanson, 2011). In this article, we address empowering diverse families by focusing on the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices (RPs), particularly the theme on family-centered practices (DEC, 2014), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards, particularly Standard 7: Families (NAEYC, 2018). As Figure 1 illustrates, we first introduce family empowerment as a larger system. Then we discuss identifying concerns, priorities, and resources from families' perspectives and how educators respond to families' concerns and priorities. We further discuss strategies for establishing a trusting relationship within the context of culturally responsive practice. Finally, we summarize by highlighting the outcomes of using a family empowerment system:

improved child outcomes as a result of empowered families.

The System of Family Empowerment

It is risky or detrimental to over-generalize about family needs, priorities, values, and beliefs. Even for families from the same cultural backgrounds, no two families are exactly alike (Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002; Lynch & Hanson, 2011; Noonan & McCormick, 2014). Research has shown that how a family effectively adapts to a stressful situation relates to factors such as how the family defines their needs or concerns, what resources are available, and how these factors interact with each other (Dunst & Trivette, 2008; Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007; Fults & Harry, 2012). Cultural values play a critical role in how families define stress and how comfortable families are in seeking resources for help (Lynch & Hanson, 2011). Examining these strengths will promote effective EC services that foster optimal child development and overall family functioning.
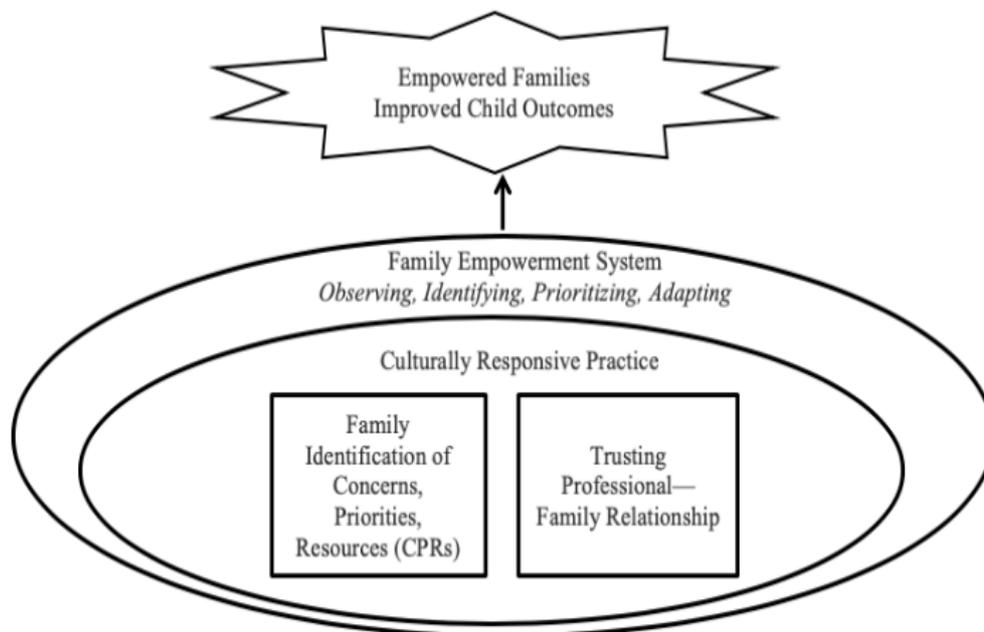

Figure 1.
The Framework of Family Empowerment Model for Serving Diverse Families.

Since the first United States special education law was adopted in 1975, a movement has shifted from the model emphasizing family deficits to a model that emphasizes family empowerment and family-centered practices (Cartledge et al., 2002; Crossman, Warfield, Kotelchuck, Hauser-Cram, & Parish, 2018; Dunst & Hamby, 2019; Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002; Fults & Harry, 2012). Empowering families as a system has been the goal of family-oriented EC services with the family in the center and the child as the focus. EC professionals seek to collaborate with families to enhance the family's capacity to support their children. Globally, it is important for practitioners to view family empowerment as a system because the relationship between factors involved is not a step-by-step linear process. Instead, it is an interactive system with multiple factors involved, leading to improved child and family outcomes. We proposed the system of family empowerment by combining the classical family crisis coping theory initially proposed by Hill (1949) with the family systems intervention model developed by Dunst and Trivette (2008). Hill's theory supports the system of family empowerment in that *all* families have their existing or potential resources to cope with a stressor or crisis, depending on how they would perceive the stressor. We extend Hill's theory in the context of EC by applying the family systems intervention model that emphasizes capacity-building by identifying and adapting the current family resources (Dunst & Trivette, 2008; Trivette, Dunst, O'Herin, & Hamby, 2008). We further identify the cultural values of individual families from a sociocultural view that highlights collaboration and cultural reciprocity between professionals and families (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Wright, Ford, & Walters, 2016; Zero to Three, 2016). Therefore, the system of family empowerment does not only view the family as a system with its own unique coping strategies for dealing with a stressor (Hill, 1949), but also prepares EC educators with culturally responsive knowledge and skills to empower the family (Hamby, Trivette, Dunst, & O'Herin, 2008). The following section and Table 1 illustrates the four components of this system (observing, identifying, prioritizing, and adapting) in relation to the DEC-RPs (DEC, 2014).

Table 1.
The System of Family Empowerment (FE) for DEC-RP Family Practices

DEC-RP Family Practices	FE component	What professionals do	What families do
F3. Practitioners are responsive to family's concerns, priorities, and changing life circumstances.	Observing	Observing family routines, activities, contexts; Observing unique characteristics of family functioning; Asking open-ended questions	Confirming/clarifying routines, activities, contexts; Sharing stories; Acknowledging "hidden" culture of the family
F7. Practitioners work with the family to identify formal and informal resources.	Identifying	Acknowledging family existing resources; Recognizing additional resources; Identifying formal and informal family support systems	Sharing successful stories using the existing resources; Sharing struggles/challenge; Considering additional resources; Strengthening family support systems
F1. Practitioners build trusting and respectful partnerships with the family through responsive interactions.	Prioritizing	Respecting family values, beliefs, perceptions; Listening to family concerns; Facilitating conversations among all family members; Encouraging all family members to be part of the team	Sharing family values and percetions; Telling stories of every family member contributing to the functioning of the whole family; Ranking of importance and urgency of concerns and needs from each family member
F7. Practitioners work with the family to achieve family-identified outcomes or goals.	Adapting	Sorting out family concerns, resources, priorities; Suggesting additional resources; Helping family develop child and family goals; Supporting family decisions and choice making	Identifying prioritized goals for the child and family; Adapting coping strategies toward the goals; Developing new goals for the child and family

Note. Family Practices from the Division of Early Childhood Recommended Practices (DEC, 2014)

Observing

EC professionals can observe family routines across routines, activities, and contexts to identify "stressors" for the family, particularly events that are less obvious than the primary stressor in the family's life. For observations to be effective, it is essential that the professional observes across settings and understands the unique characteristics of the individual family. Further, speaking with families to confirm the observations will ensure accurate information and allow families to share their own stories. Asking open-ended instead of either/or questions would provide opportunities for parents to tell their story from their perspectives (See Table 1). Asking: "What is your family's typical Sunday activity?" sounds more inviting and less presumptive than: "Are you going to Church every Sunday?" Similarly, we ask: "How do you spend your holidays?" instead of: "Has your family been to the beach?"

> *After speaking to the Wilson family and observing their home life, Patricia understood that the primary stressor in their family started with having a child who was born prematurely, with health issues, and a high risk for developmental delays. However, Mrs. Wilson explained that she and her husband were both very accomplished professionals with high expectations for their "dream" child. As Mrs. Wilson admitted, she had to accept that her child may be academically "average" and may not love learning as much as she and her husband*

Identifying

Identifying existing family resources and accessing potential family resources may vary from family to family. It is essential that EC professionals value the family's existing resources by focusing on strengths *before* the educator provides additional resources. For example, professionals can ask questions to determine current informal support systems: "How do other people in your child's life (grandparents, friends, neighbors) support your family?", formal supports systems: "What makes this family function without child care, therapies, or other formal support systems?", stress alleviating strategies: "What are the family's strategies for dealing with problems?", and goals "What does the family want to achieve?" By identifying existing resources, professionals can more accurately help families recognize individualized supports that are meaningful for their specific concerns (Dunst & Hamby, 2019; Harry, 2008).

> *As Mrs. Wilson feared, Lily began to refuse to go to school (a private early childcare program), saying, "I hate school." Mrs. Wilson came to her faculty colleague with expertise in EI/ECSE, stating that she needed help to deal with Lily's challenging behavior. Mrs. Wilson was frustrated because she tried several strategies recommended by the EI team, but none of them worked. Instead of trying to give her another strategy, her colleague asked about the existing family resources that may help improve Lily's behavior, such as "Who is her favorite friend? What is the family's favorite after school activity?" Mrs. Wilson quickly recognized that Lily's best friend lived nearby and Lily might want to go to school with her. It worked!*

Prioritizing

Professionals need to realize that a stressor is not a concern until the *family* views it as a concern. These different views can lead to miscommunication between service providers and family members (Harry, 2008). Professionals needs to realize that their priorities may or may not be a major stressor for the family and other relevant factors could be the more urgent need (Harry, 2008). For example, Mrs. Ruiz stated that obtaining EI services for Carson is not as important as his child care or finding transportation to an upcoming doctor's appointment. EC professionals can understand the family's views of the stressors through formal and informal methods, including conversational interviews with all members of the family. When interviewing a family, it is important to establish a trusting relationship so the family feels comfortable speaking about and prioritizing concerns and stressors. Professionals can also reflect on their observations and explain their priorities. When everyone shares their priorities, professionals can begin to recognize and understand differences in perceptions.

> *When Mrs. Ruiz was informed about Carson's delay, she was not only emotionally unready to accept the fact, but also she had to sort out her family resources in order to prioritize the needs of Carson and his family. She did not understand what it meant for Carson to have a "delay" and she was not ready to allow professionals—strangers—in her house every week. Mrs. Ruiz's EI service coordinator, Jana, understood this and explained she will continue*

to be in touch to discuss developmental concerns. When Mrs. Ruiz is ready, Jana will help organize services.

Adapting

After professionals help families prioritize their stressors and identify their resources, they can help the family develop positive strategies for coping with the stressors, leading to improved outcomes of the child and the family. When an unexpected event occurs to a family, the family's initial reaction could be positive or negative; rarely would the family stay the same (Hill, 1949; Kilzer & Pedersen, 2011). There could be three possibilities as a result of the event: improved functioning (the family's situation improves), same functioning (the family's situation stays the same), or reduced functioning (the family's situation becomes worse). The key is how the family perceives the event. When the family views the stressors as negative, they are more likely to have "reduced functioning," and this hinders the family's ability to cope with the stressor and find productive ways to overcome. When the stressors are perceived positively and proactively, the family is more likely to seek additional resources. These resources will support the family to become more skilled in problem solving through its adaptation to the events. The result is "improved functioning," and an empowered family with more knowledge, competencies, and coping strategies.

Mrs. Ruiz and Jana began to speak on the phone every two weeks to discuss Carson's development and the family's concerns. One week, Mrs. Ruiz explained that she was getting more worried about Carson because he was throwing more tantrums, getting in trouble at school, and it was very stressful for the family. Mrs. Ruiz stated that the whole family was arguing more and the environment was tense. It was hard for Mrs. Ruiz to speak about this; however, she now felt comfortable talking with Jana about the stressful events and the conversations were a great support.

Family Empowerment within the Context of Culturally Responsive Practice
Identification of Family Concerns, Priorities, and Resources

Trivette and Banerjee (2015) proposed three underlying principles to guide the family practices: (1) Parents are the primary unit of family-centered services (Bruder, 2010, as cited by Trivette & Banerjee); (2) Parents' confidence and competence is essential in parent-professional interactions; and (3) Families' unique characteristics must be respected (p. 66-67). These three principles also support our family empowerment model, particularly in identifying concerns, priorities, and resources. We recommend that families' needs be identified from the *individual* family's perspective, paying close attention to cultural and linguistic differences. Professionals are not the sole experts to make decisions for the child and the child's family. Instead, we emphasize the child's and family's strengths and acknowledge the vital role that families take in facilitating their child's development and the overall functioning of their family (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000; Popp & You, 2016; Trivette & Banerjee, 2015; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007).

In the family empowerment model, families are capable of making choices and decisions regarding the child's development and family needs. Educators can play an active role in helping families identify resources to support the child's development and improve family functioning (Trivette & Banerjee, 2015). See Table 2 for an example of how we apply the empowerment model to the Wilson and Ruiz families in identifying their concerns, priorities, and resources.

Establishing a Trusting Relationship

Professionals must establish a trusting relationship before they are truly able to observe, identify stressors, and communicate effectively with families. They can build a trusting relationship by understanding the family's priorities, typical routines, culture, stressors, and emotional struggles. A family's individual needs and values shape the way they interact with professionals and what education they believe is best for their child. For example, Mrs. Ruiz identified that she would like Carson to make friends on the playground and stop having tantrums daily, while Mrs. Wilson expressed her concerns with Lily's academic abilities. Each of these concerns show that the two families value different aspects of their child's development. It is important that professionals get to know

family members as unique individuals and understand these differences as they build a relationship and communicate (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

Cultural differences can be a barrier to building a trusting relationship when professionals and families hold differing views on educational values, decisions, and practices. However, professionals can effectively collaborate with families from differing backgrounds when they feel comfortable with diversity and are aware of the dangers of stereotyping. Professionals must acknowledge their own stereotypes and understand that even for families from the same cultural backgrounds, no two families are exactly alike (Cartledge et al., 2002; Noonan & McCormick, 2014). For example, one might assume that the Wilson family with well-educated parents might understand the EI process fully because Mrs. Wilson explained that she continually reads and researches information to help Lily. However, she and Mrs. Ruiz both expressed concerns that the EI practitioners were asking the families to help with intervention and goal setting, explaining that this was the practitioner's responsibility because "they are the experts."

Getting to know each individual family to truly understand their priorities and values is essential. When professionals target goals that are important for the family and engage in practices that respect the family's cultural beliefs, it empowers families to collaboratively work on the same goals; thus, promoting positive child and family outcomes (Fettig, Schultz, & Ostrosky, 2013; Popp & You, 2016). Parents are more likely to feel empowered when engaged in a trusting, collaboratively relationship (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

Family Empowerment in Practice

Initially, the Wilson family's service coordinator, Patricia, offered research-based articles, books, web resources, and connections to specialists to help address the Wilsons' desire to learn more about preterm infants. As EI services continued, Patricia provided the family with ongoing feedback about Lily's developmental progress through conversations, observation notes, milestone checklists, and formal reports. Consistent communication through multiple means helped the Wilsons to feel much more informed and knowledgeable about Lily's strengths and needs. Patricia knew the Wilsons wanted to see improvements in Lily's skills right away, and recognized the need to help the family prioritize their concerns so that together they could identify specific strategies for achieving Lily's goals. Mrs. Wilson felt empowered because Patricia helped identify the family's current routines and existing resources before offering several options for how to naturalistically support Lily.

Table 2.

Supporting Diverse Families to Identify Their Concerns, Priorities, and Resources

Components	Questions from practitioners	Wilson Family	Smith Family
Concerns	What is the primary concern? What are the related concerns, for each family?	Lily's health issues, academic expectations, current and future school success	Parent education, home environment, financial limit
Priorities	What is the most *urgent* concern that affects the child receiving EI/ECSE services? What is the most important concern that affects *everyone* in the family?	Health, school readiness, family adaptation	Parent education, professional support, financial support
Resources	What has the family been doing well regarding the child's needs and the family needs? How does the family deal with stressful routines and unexpected events? What could be done to improve the situation?	Existing Resources: Professional and interpersonal support Additional resources for the family to reach their priorities: Emotional support from extended family, parent organization, professional conferences	Existing Resources: Extended family support Additional resources for the family to reach their priorities: Parent training workshops and resources on child development, EI funding sources

At first Jana, the Ruiz family service coordinator, noticed that Mrs. Ruiz adopted a passive role during their meetings. She sensed Mrs. Ruiz saw her as the expert who needed to solve Caron's "problems" and knew that often families new to EI were hesitant to openly communicate with someone they did not yet know well. Jana reflected on how she could build a trusting relationship with the family. Jana knew Mrs. Ruiz was sensitive about her modest home so initially she suggested they meet to talk at a neighborhood playground or on the phone where both would feel comfortable. Over the course of several meetings and conversations, Jana observed, asked questions, and listened so that she could better understand the family's concerns, priorities, and resources. Jana asked Mrs. Ruiz to share her expertise about her son so that Jana could learn from her and she used Mrs. Ruiz's photos of Carson as a springboard for conversation. During each encounter, Jana prompted Mrs. Ruiz to take the lead in sharing information and progress updates. As Mrs. Ruiz and Jana built an open and trusting relationship, Jana suggested that Mrs. Ruiz consider the idea of allowing a developmental specialist to visit and work with the family and Carson. Mrs. Ruiz now trusted Jana; thus, she is now going to accept developmental therapy. Further, Mrs. Ruiz now feels empowered and is volunteering her ideas about promoting Carson's progress.

These vignettes illustrate how Patricia and Jana got to know the Wilson and Ruiz families to truly understand their priorities and values. These professionals built a trusting relationship with the families and learned how to best communicate with them to provide suggestions and resources. Because of the trusting relationships formed, both families feel empowered to speak freely about their ideas about promoting their child's outcomes. In Table 3 we provide more tips and resources for professionals and families to promote effective communication and collaboration.

Family empowerment is essential to effective family-centered practices, especially for diverse families. In alignment with the DEC-RP (2014) and NAEYC families standards (2018), and the three underlying principles proposed by Trivette and Banerjee (2015), we demonstrate a family empowerment model for serving diverse families. In this model, we view family empowerment as a system that involves an interactive and dynamic cycle including observing, identifying, prioritizing, and adapting to empower families in identifying their concerns, priorities, and resources as well as establishing a trusting professional-family relationship. We believe the family empowerment model is only meaningful when it is practiced in culturally responsive contexts.

Table 3.

Tips and Resources

Learn More:

-Online Articles and Briefs: "Overcome the Language Barrier" Beck (2015).

"Young Children in Immigrant Families" Blanchard, Catlett, Newton, & Hurley (2017).

"What is Cultural Reciprocity?" Zero to Three (2016).

-Online Webinar: "Partnering with Diverse Families: The National Framework for Dual Capacity Building" by Mapp, K., Perez, J., & Aggarwal, C. (2014).

Tips and Resources for Families and Professionals:

-To promote home and school collaboration and diversity in the classroom, educators can send home picture flash cards and ask parents to translate into their home language.

- *ESL-Kids.com:* http://esl-kids.com/ contains picture flashcards, worksheets, games, and songs in English. *Printable Spanish:* http://printablespanish.com/ contains tons on worksheets, games, and flashcards written in Spanish. *Semanda.com:* http://www.semanda.com/printable.aspx provides free picture flashcards in Chinese and English.

-The PACER Center is a **parent training and information center** for families of children with differing disabilities and it is funded by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. Their website includes lots of great resources surrounding: "Working with Culturally Diverse Families." The page includes videos, links to the research, resources for educators and parents, and national organizations associated. Here is a great informational sheet on "Strategies for Success in Local Early Childhood Parent Outreach Activities Among Diverse Cultures."

-Multiculturalchildrenslit.com is a web site that contains many children's books related to a variety of different cultural groups, including: African Americans, Chinese Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans, Japanese Americans, Jewish Americans, Native Americans, and Korean Americans.

-Teaching Tolerance is a web site designed for teachers to read about and discuss issues around diversity.

Globally parents' involvement in their child's learning promotes educational achievement (Afolabi, 2014) and when parents are knowledgeable about their child's learning they feel empowered (Bayrakli & Sucuoglu, 2018). Ultimately by improving these family practices and empowering the family's ability to advocate for their child, we are ensuring each child receives the most appropriate services available to meet their needs. Families who are empowered are likely to empower their children and encourage them to reach their full potential (Knopf & Swick, 2007; Popp & You, 2016). When parents are empowered, they are equipped with the competence and confidence in promoting optimal outcomes for the child and the whole family.

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