Diverse families

You may wish to take some time out from the challenges of the current COVID-19 situation to think about how your service is including and supporting non-traditional family structures. This newsletter will look at resources that embrace diversity and non-traditional family structures, and ways to ensure that they are supported. For this month’s case study, we will look at how Lilyfield’s Explore and Develop centre chose to celebrate diversity.

Love Makes a Family

This month, we spoke to Kathryn Albany at a Lilyfield long day care centre. Explore and Develop is a small centre in Sydney’s inner west. The centre has families from a variety of backgrounds, and inclusivity is at the heart of their practice.

Our philosophy talks a lot about social justice and equity and that’s a core part of what we do every day in every interaction.

Principle 5 of the EYLF requires ‘Ongoing learning and reflective practice’ (EYLF p 13). At Explore and Develop, the centre’s staff undertake in-depth research and enquiry to ensure that they are continually growing and developing as educators. Kathryn herself has recently obtained her masters and presented on her own research at a conference.

We believe in undergoing academic research as part of our practice. You may have the practical and the hands-on side of this role considered, but if you’re not thinking deeply about these issues then you’re missing real opportunities to have a deep and lasting impact.

After reading the picture book *Wrestle!*, a story of a young boy going to the Mardi Gras parade with his mums, Kathryn was inspired to start a project with her class, looking at diverse family structures.

After reading this book with the children we decided we wanted to go deeper and challenge some of the heteronormativity we see. We also wanted to allow children a bit of freedom from those constraints. We read a lot of literature featuring diverse families so children could normalise all the differences.

Kathryn and her class started a project called ‘Love Makes a Family’. They created a book with one page per child. Each child drew a picture and narrated something about their family.

Through sharing these stories, the children could see that, while the families had a different structure, they all had love.
Kathryn reports that she immediately noticed a shift in the children's play. Games were expanded to include family structures that didn't just include a mum and a dad.

It was fascinating. We started having children say, 'We're playing mums! I'm the mum, and she's the mum.' I think children can adapt a little faster than adults sometimes.

This project was overwhelmingly supported by the families at the centre, but there was one family who objected. They contacted the centre to request the educators stop talking about LGBTQI+ families altogether. Kathryn and her colleagues agreed to provide an alternative activity for their child but told the concerned parents that they would continue to discuss all manner of diverse families with the rest of the class.

Children have the right to be exposed to diversity. If parents are uncomfortable, we will provide their children with something else wonderful to do, but we are not going to stop reading these books or teaching diversity because a few parents are uncomfortable. We believe we have an ethical obligation to ensure these children are given an anti-bias perspective.

In discussing educators who may steer clear of LGBTQI+ topics for fear of backlash, Kathryn urged them to reflect on what is required of educators in core documents that underpin the profession, like the EYLF and the Rights of the Child. These documents explicitly promote inclusivity and representing all families in the communities, including LGBTQI+ families.

What's the alternative? By not talking about these things, you're making a political choice, and what does this communicate to children who feel ashamed or excluded?

Inclusion is part of our core business; it isn't something to be scared of. Back yourself to do it!

You can learn more about the ‘Love Makes a Family’ project in an article Kathryn and her team wrote for Community Early Learning Australia.

Note: LGBTQI+ denotes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, queer, asexual and questioning.
Resources

Books
Here is a great list of books you can include that feature diverse family structures:

- *And Tango makes three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson
- *Love makes a family* by Sophie Beer
- *A family is a family is a family* by Sara O'Leary
- *Families, families, families* by Suzanne Lang
- *The family book* by Todd Parr

Language matters
In the report *Love (still) makes a family*, Rainbow Families explores the discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ families when accessing government services. One of the continual issues is the language used, and assumptions communicated through something as simple as paperwork. Words on paper can unintentionally exclude groups who do not see themselves represented or can't find a box to tick.

Further reading
*Rethinking images of inclusion* includes stimulus materials to shift thinking about inclusion and exclusion.

*Exploring multiculturalism, anti bias and social justice in children's services* is a free resource exploring the importance of multiculturalism and how this links to anti bias, equity and social justice in early years settings.

Supporting rainbow families in early childhood
It is important to challenge assumptions and be on the lookout for ways that our own unconscious bias may affect our practice. Have a look at this video, in which Kiwi early educator and researcher Kath Cooper further explains the concept of ‘heteronormativity’ and looks at small and simple changes you can make to promote inclusivity.

Have a think about the paperwork used within your centre. Do the forms specify Mother/Father? If so, could this be changed to Parent/Parent, or perhaps Guardian/Guardian to remove the assumption that a family must be made up of a mother and a father? Filling out a form may be the first interaction a parent has with the education system. Think of ways to ensure all families feel represented and welcome.
What’s in a rainbow?
Families today come in all shapes and sizes. Family structures in your centre might include married heterosexual parents, single parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, same sex parents, or grandparents as guardians. LGBTQ+ parented families are often referred to as rainbow families. The 2016 Census estimated that there were 46,800 same-sex households in Australia, and 10,050 children living in same-sex households. Rainbow Families is also the name of a volunteer-run organisation that offers support, hosts events and shares resources. Some of the resources on the Rainbow Families website may help educators gain a better understanding of the same-sex parents in their community.

Addressing concerns
The educator in today’s case study talks about a family who felt uncomfortable with educators talking about LGBTQ+ families. Given the diversity of backgrounds and opinions within our communities, it is not surprising that educators and parents don’t always see eye to eye. It is important that educators have strategies in place to thoughtfully address any issues that may arise. The Australian Institute of Family Studies have published an article called ‘Building relationships between parents and carers in early childhood.’ This article looks at the importance of developing story parent/educator relationships and provides some practical strategies for addressing conflicts.

If there are concerns amongst educators, think about running some inclusivity training, workshops or even engaging a consultant for some professional development. It is important that educators are provided a safe learning environment where they can ask questions. There are a few consultants who specialise in inclusive practice training; a web search will put you in touch with them.