

# YC

**Young Children**

Winter 2022

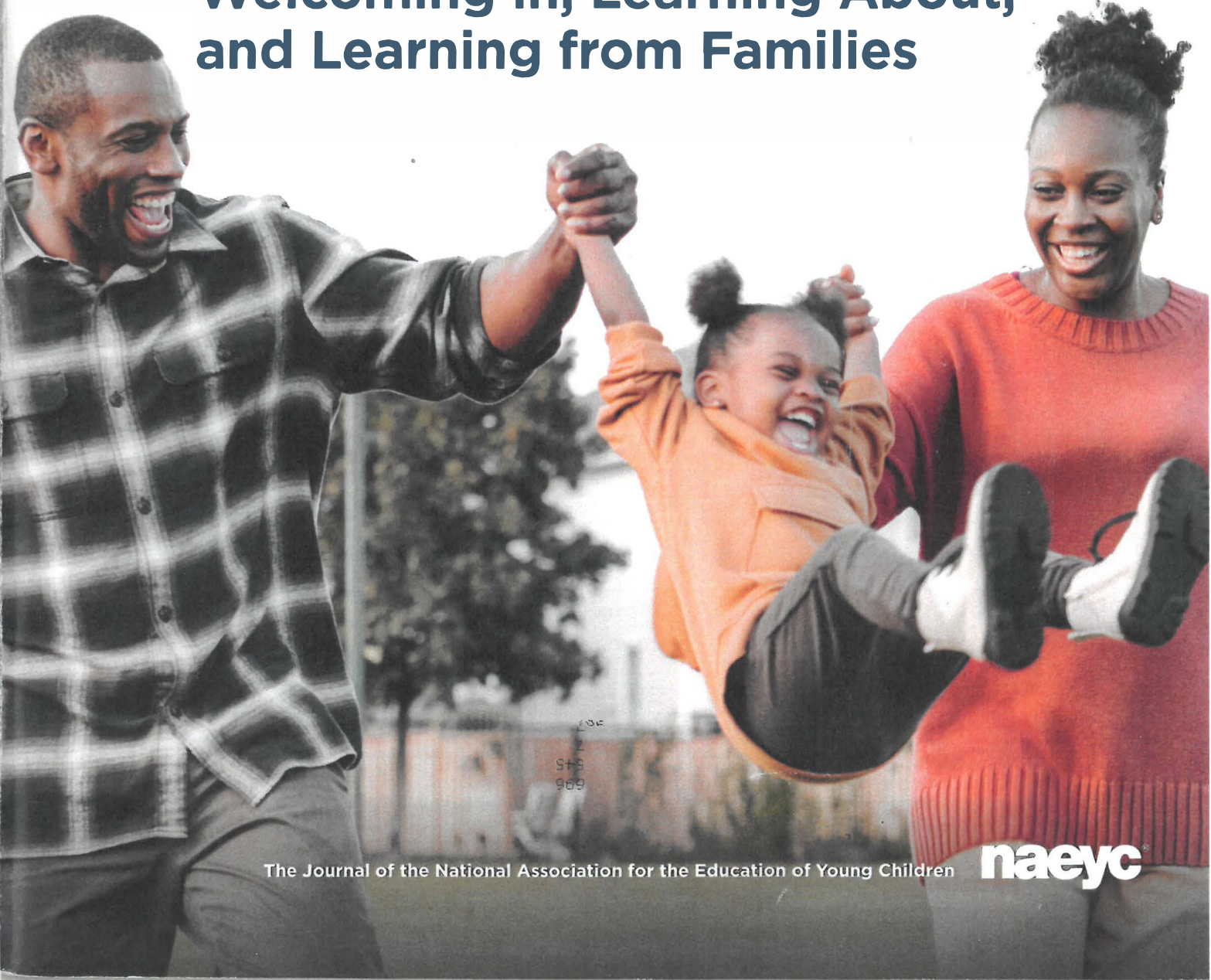
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## Welcoming in, Learning About, and Learning from Families



The Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

**naeyc**



## Welcoming in, Learning About, and Learning from Families

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**YC-Young Children** (ISSN 1538-6619) is published quarterly (mailing in the months of March, June, September, and December) by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1401 H Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005.

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## Welcoming Black Dads

### Action Steps and Reflections on Becoming Culturally Competent

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**Lindsey L. Wilson and Josh Thompson**

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At his weekly trip to the barbershop with his son, Brandon shares with a group of other Black fathers: “You never know what you do that’s gonna make a difference, man. You know what I mean? Like, I never thought that, like, just picking up my kid every day from school that I’d be in a study group for African

American men. Like, I really took pride in that, like when she asked me that, bro. Like, that really made me feel like some type of way. You feel me?”

**C**ontrary to common depictions of African American fathers amplified by mainstream media, these men are actively involved in the development of their children’s lives. Many African



## Authors' Note

While NAEYC's publication style is to capitalize Black and White, we recognize that language related to racial identities is an ever-evolving process. We also acknowledge that Black signifies more than a color: it encapsulates the history and racial identity of African Americans. While still grappling with the decision,

we capitalize Black and lowercase white for many of the same reasons that Muller and colleagues chose in their Spring 2022 *Young Children* article, "Toward Pro-Black Early Childhood Teacher Education." Finally, as in previous publications, we use African American fathers interchangeably with Black fathers, and fathers with dads.

American fathers report that being a parent is one of the most important roles they have in life (Wilson 2018a). In this article, we (the authors) share five practices that early childhood educators can follow to become culturally competent in building relationships with Black fathers of children in their schools:

1. Examine the curriculum
2. Build relationships
3. Talk the talk
4. Walk the walk
5. Become culturally competent

These recommended practices are based on the voices and stories of Black fathers who consistently share how much they value their roles as fathers who identify as Black. My research work (Lindsey), as a Black woman, challenges mainstream depictions of Black fathers in media with a more accurate account of these fathers, based on their reports. This form of counternarrative challenges the dominant ways of looking at Black fathers. Partnering with Josh brings a white male perspective to the work, a view that acknowledges how white privilege is pervasive in every discussion about how schools welcome/restrict Black fathers. Josh's research values fathering as a significant role in children's lives and also from a man's identity.

Each of these recommended practices includes action steps and reflection questions to guide teachers' thinking and transformation to become culturally competent early childhood educators. Quotations are from Black fathers who participated in several research focus groups (Wilson 2018a; Wilson 2018b).

## Fathers' Unique Perspectives

As educators, we have all done it: welcomed new families into our school or program, provided admission packets, and set families up on a digital app to receive communication, billing, attendance, and other critical information about the classroom. We have told first-time parents and families of young children what we thought they needed to know. But have we asked families what they expect from and can bring to our programs? Do families, particularly fathers, feel welcomed and accepted in the educational space with all the untold norms of how to be "successful" and "professional" when entering that setting? Have we made Black fathers in particular feel included just as they are, in their uniqueness as a parent? Have we really seen them, recognized the tremendous value they bring to the classroom, the knowledge they offer the other children, and the support they provide us in understanding their child?

While we value and promote relationships as the key to children's early development, we must recognize that these same concepts extend to welcoming African American fathers (Foubert 2019). African American fathers have reported feeling misunderstood, underrepresented, and not fully seen or valued when it comes to school engagement (Wilson 2018a). Research continues to demonstrate that men are involved in the lives of their young children (Fagan & Barnett 2003; Foubert 2019). Most children know a lot about their dads: what they do, the type of vehicle they drive, and how they smell (Hall 2016). Father engagement has a positive effect on children's sense of security, both physically and emotionally, and on their self-esteem and academic outcomes (Cano, Perales, & Baxter 2019; Coates & Phares 2019). Additionally, fathers benefit in

general health and well-being when they spend time with their children (Gold, Edin, & Nelson 2020; Wilson & Thompson 2021).

While educators have a unique capacity, training, and understanding to work with certain age groups (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez 2021), families contain specific knowledge, insights, and wisdom concerning their children over time (Cano, Perales, & Baxter 2019; NAEYC 2020). Among all the family members engaged in a child's life, dads bring a unique perspective. This is often attuned to external factors outside the home, such as in schools and early learning programs (Baker 2018). Welcoming the treasury of knowledge and insight that fathers have into their children's lives improves a teacher's understanding of that child—even more so if the child comes from a home with social, cultural, and/or linguistic diversities. Variations of custodial or residential status should not eliminate active engagement between family members and the early learning setting.

### Parenting While Black

It's the fourth week of school, and the teacher overhears Brandon, father of 5-year-old Yazmin, proudly share with another Black father during his daily drop off: "My son's school loves me. They're like, 'Hey man, you can volunteer?'"

"I wish I could," the other dad replies. "I want to too, but I know they won't accept me. They are not going to accept who I am."

Fathers often experience unique barriers that prevent them from feeling welcomed into early childhood spaces. Research continues to demonstrate that when teachers say "parents," many still mean "mothers" (Thompson 2018). Black men encounter additional challenges as fathers, and they often report feeling othered, not fully accepted in educational spaces, or not even viewed as a parent (Allen 2013; Wilson 2018a). This requires teachers to think about welcoming and learning from Black fathers in very purposeful ways. In this article, we identify intentional practices that teachers should consider in order to learn from Black fathers. We outline five ways to facilitate our thinking about how we can change our family-school connections to welcome and value the skills, experiences, and expertise of Black fathers.

## Five Practices to Foster Inclusivity and Create Culturally Competent Classrooms

When Rashaad shows up to volunteer for a campus clean-up day, he stands outside his son Michael's infant classroom, awkwardly not knowing how to step in. Roberta, the classroom teacher, overhears him say to another Black dad, "I ain't really have my dad, so I'ma be here for my son . . . you know, stay in his life." When Roberta engages with Rashaad, she learns about his expertise with fish tanks. Together, they clean out the class aquarium and talk about their favorite subject—Michael. After cleaning up for the day, Roberta tells her coworkers, "You know, it was great to get my fish tank cleaned, but even better, I learned a lot about Michael's family, how much his daddy cares for him!"

### Practice 1: Examine the Curriculum

The preexisting curricula in many schools and programs have significant bias built into their fabric (hooks 1994; Sturdivant & Alanís 2021). Of course, facts are facts, and skills are skills, but prejudice informs which facts are emphasized and how themes are organized and presented. The skills to be learned come from preconceived notions about what children need to be successful at school and in life.

While it is not the job of a classroom teacher to rewrite the whole curriculum, it is the duty and responsibility of each and every teacher to construct filters and frames to analyze what we teach in early childhood settings (NAEYC 2022). In an exercise Emdin (2016) calls "Reality Pedagogy," educators go through the process of unlearning traditional forms of education to adapt and co-construct with learners the purposes and intents of schooling, based from within their cultural framework. Realigning what children are learning with the values and concerns of their families helps cocreate a curriculum that ensures families' strengths and expertise are embedded into it.

## Father engagement has a positive effect on children's sense of security and on their self-esteem and academic outcomes.

Including Black fathers in establishing the “what” of classroom learning flips many norms inside out, but it is an essential part of welcoming dads into the learning environment. This begins with creating space for families to share their counternarratives and stories of life and family that are not commonly understood or appreciated. A pedagogy of listening affords teachers the opportunity to learn from families, and Black fathers can bring their insights into the discussion of “what” to teach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2011). This is an intentional way to supplement a curriculum that lacks cultural responsiveness.

Kevin comes to the child-led family-teacher conferences with a notepad. This Black dad writes down key points of what his 5-year-old daughter, Lucille, talks about. When they begin discussing goals for the next semester, Lucille looks up at him.

“Daddy, you know how we have been working on drawing people? Well, I think I need to work on drawing fingers and faces.”

Kevin flips to the page in his notebook where he has already written down something similar. Kevin agrees with Lucille and adds the importance of drawing people with different melanins and hairstyles to represent people who resemble their extended family.

Later, back at work, Kevin tells his coworker about the conference. “A lot of my kids’ teachers, they’ll say, ‘We can tell you’re involved.’ . . . I have expectations. . . . I’m intentional about the outcome I want, and I’m working toward that in my children’s lives, so those teachers always look at me and say, ‘No, your kids are fine.’”

### Action Steps

1. Using a racial and ethnic lens, examine your curriculum for evidence of oppressive structures. Tell more of the whole story, the child’s story, by building relationships and taking into account the social and cultural contexts of each child and family.
2. Use ratings tools that are designed to help understand how your particular curriculum measures up on a cultural competence scale. For example, explore the Curriculum Consumer Report on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website ([eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/curriculum/consumer-report](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/curriculum/consumer-report)), which offers information about how different curricula relate to Head Start Program Performance Standards. One of the criteria specifically examines and offers a rating for cultural responsiveness.
3. Consider tools that will help you listen to the ways you talk with young children, including how you address them. Find recommendations for specific ethnic and local materials to support or expand your curriculum.

### Reflection Questions

1. How are various races and ethnicities represented in your setting? While this starts at the obvious, such as books, look for more subtle and hidden materials and mannerisms. How can you intentionally supplement your curriculum to make it more inclusive?
2. How do your mannerisms coincide or conflict with how children are spoken to in their homes?

### Practice 2: Build Relationships

Relationships remain critically important in engaging fathers in early learning environments. Fathers report placing a high value on building trusting relationships with their children and supportive relationships with early childhood educators (Wilson & Schindler



2019; Wilson & Thompson 2021). Given the unique experiences of Black fathers and reports from these men that educators do not “really see Black men as parents,” educators must take the time to get to know who these men are and invest in establishing a strong rapport with them. Part of establishing a relationship with these men requires educators to engage in conversations about what Black fathers believe is important for their children and relevant in their lives.

Race and its impact on their children’s learning and future are topics that Black fathers find particularly important (Wilson & Thompson 2020). Building relationships with Black fathers looks different from building relationships with other parents because of the harmful effects of race and racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). Black fathers know the disparities and understand the implications of a society that is anti-Black and that seeks to prepare their Black children for the “real world” (Akande 2014; Coates 2015). Educational environments that have adopted a colorblind approach (in which staff ignore or do not regularly and explicitly recognize the concept of race and the reality of its impact) can create an uninviting space that limits the learning that can happen from these men. Schools and programs that have taken the opposite approach by seeing, valuing, and relying on the expertise of Black fathers—just as they are—have seen tremendous engagement.

Monica, an Early Head Start program director, stops Jaime Sr. one morning to ask if he would be willing to participate in a Black fathers focus group. The program is collaborating with a researcher to learn more about Black men’s experiences as fathers. Jaime Sr.’s excitement comes through as he says, “I’m there. I have intentionally shaped a culture within my family and started yearly traditions. There are four things I do every year with my family: traveling, camping, celebrating with other families, and it’s important for my children to also see me around other Black men, other Black fathers.”

Jamie Sr.’s response highlights activities and topics that he finds critical to his fatherhood role. His response about the importance of creating a family culture that includes spending quality time with his family and

ensuring that his children are surrounded by other Black fathers reiterates the value that these men place on relationships and on race.

### Action Steps

1. Intentionally connect with African American fathers by taking time to get to know who they are, what they value and are concerned about, and what they enjoy doing with their children. Using a strengths-based approach when learning about African American fathers, Cooper et al.’s 2020 study highlights Black fathers’ concerns about how racism will impact their children and the strategies fathers use to help them cope and thrive (see also [thestarlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/black-fathers-voices-project-2.mp4](https://thestarlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/black-fathers-voices-project-2.mp4)). This knowledge can inform how you think about and respond to children and families.
2. Rather than telling them how to be involved in school, seek input from fathers on the most effective way that schools can operate.

### Reflection Questions

1. How do you build relationships with African American fathers? How does it differ from the ways that you connect with fathers or mothers of other races or ethnicities?
2. How do school personnel recognize and acknowledge the influence of race and racism in Black fathers’ parenting?
3. While there may be culturally relevant styles, every dad parents differently. Ask the fathers in your setting how they parent, and share with them your genuine respect and curiosity toward the lessons they identify as critical for their children. You might find that after learning to listen, you have begun to talk the talk with each father, sometimes in unexpected and unfamiliar places.

### Practice 3: Talk the Talk

As 3-year-old Jasmine and her Black dad come out of the barbershop, she sees her teacher, Mr. Yang. She drops her father's hand and runs across the sidewalk to wave at him. Cameron yells out, "Don't bother that man."

Mr. Yang laughs and greets Jasmine and her dad. The Asian American teacher has heard about the barbershop culture, but he has never thought about how it impacts his students and their fathers. Cameron comments, "I don't want to be gone from my kids for too long. . . . I do need my 'me time,' but I know, that time I have with them, I cherish it."

Barbershops serve as safe havens for cultural chats amongst the Black community (Irby 2017). As a weekly tradition, Black fathers often talk about sports, politics, family, and their children's development. It is not uncommon for Black men to enter the barbershop and stay for hours sharing stories with other Black fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and neighbors about their child's latest development, the type of interactions they have with schools and teachers, and other relevant events pertaining to their young children. As a space built on trusted relationships, a lot of parenting advice and solution-oriented conversations take place in barbershops every day.

Often, Black fathers take pride in introducing their young children, particularly their sons, to other men in the barbershop. Many families follow the tradition of taking their sons to the barbershop to get their first haircuts on or around the child's first birthday. From healthy snacks to juicy new words (*clippers*, *scissors*, and *liners*), concepts, and sounds, the barbershop is full of natural learning opportunities. Because of this, Alvin Irby, an educator and the founder of Barbershop Books ([barbershopbooks.org](http://barbershopbooks.org)), sparked a national movement to promote reading in barbershops (Irby 2021). This movement is founded on the importance that Black fathers place on positive, early, and culturally meaningful reading experiences to develop children's reading identity. By partnering with barbers, Barbershop Books establishes a library for Black children to get excited about reading and to have access to books that represent them.

Besides the social and emotional communication and cognitive development that happen in barbershops, Black fathers are developing parenting skills and techniques (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen 2013). Like the Barbershop Books initiative, teachers should find innovative ways to tap into these Black fathers' funds of knowledge to draw from the language and other learning that takes place in such environments.

#### Action Steps

1. Dig deeper into the funds of knowledge attained in barbershops. To learn more about culturally relevant, community-based education programs that take place there, visit [barbershopbooks.org](http://barbershopbooks.org).
2. Mirror the enriching learning spaces that children are accustomed to outside of your setting. Ask fathers for their vision in building a play area that mimics barbershops.
3. Seek the support of Black fathers to understand what is needed to make the classroom a safe space where their children can learn.

#### Reflection Questions

1. What are the selection criteria for your settings' books and other materials? How many books are written or illustrated by authors of color? Do children see themselves in the books, and is there alignment with the books they may be exposed to in their home and community contexts?
2. What opportunities are available to tap into the wealth of knowledge that happens at the barbershop and to bring it directly into the classroom in a way that allows fathers to be the subject matter experts?

### Practice 4: Walk the Walk

Head Start teachers Esmeralda and Julian are anxious about their home visit with Kwania's family. Mostly, they make arrangements with



mothers and meet in their homes for quick updates on at-home activities that will help the children in Head Start. But this time, they haven't heard back from Kwania's mom, Mary. They've received some cryptic notes from the dad, Zion, but he has a different address from Mary. That's where Esmeralda and Julian are meeting him.

Upon entering Kwania's home, the teachers are impressed by the designated learning space that Zion has established. It resembles a miniature classroom, with a whiteboard and easel at eye level for Kwania, a library area, and what Dad refers to as a "real world lessons" area. Not sure what to think about these two parents who don't live together, both teachers are pleasantly surprised by the positive communication between the child's mom and dad. They're reassured how important Kwania is to them both when Zion explains: "I come from a family of fathers. The cats in my family take care of their kids. They rock with their kids, whether they're together with the mom or not, they going out of their way, and a lot of them end up having custody of their children."

Black fathers experience unique challenges, especially surrounding who they are perceived to be as men. There has been a long history of Black men being portrayed from a deficit-based perspective, which has influenced educators' bias (Gilliam et al. 2016; Wilson & Thompson 2020). Their feelings are captured in this father's report:

**I can't help but notice society's perception of me. When I'm with my kids, I get overwhelming praise due to the bar for Black fathers being so low that you could trip over it. Internally, I'm like, "Hey, this is what I'm supposed to do. I don't want any props for this." (Pye 2016, paragraph 4)**

Despite ongoing research that demonstrates how Black fathers are consistently involved in their children's lives, mainstream society continues to amplify deficit-based depictions that impact teachers' and others' perceptions of them. This is particularly true in cases where the father is not a residential parent. Black fathers have expressed how concerning it is that educated Black men are rarely depicted on television

and other media and how they wish that they were portrayed more often engaging in educational activities with their children (Wilson 2018a).

In the scenario above, Esmeralda and Julian were able to see firsthand how involved Zion was in his child's learning. Yet the only reason they reached out to him was because they were unable to contact the mother after several attempts. This is not uncommon. Historically, Black fathers have reported mothers serving as gatekeepers to their children's education (Fagan & Barnett 2003; Akande 2014). Teachers who only engage with mothers miss critical information, perspectives, and funds of knowledge from fathers.

### Action Steps

1. Enter into the world of the child and their family. Find ways to engage and participate in the ways Black fathers parent their children. It may be very different, or it might be just a nuanced shift from ways more familiar to what teachers are accustomed to. This shift is more than words; greater than actions. There are profound transformations that occur when teachers actively pursue a greater understanding of other cultures, other families, and other fathers.
2. Examine the cultural experiences and household norms of the Black fathers in your community. Find ways to access and enter into the richness of diversity in the parenting exhibited there.

### Reflection Questions

1. No one is immune to bias. Take time to explore what you consume about African American fathers via television, radio, curriculum, and other sources. How may this impact the relationships you create with these fathers?
2. What can you change or do more of in your classroom because of insights learned from home visits?

While we value and promote relationships as the key to children's early development, we must recognize that these same concepts extend to welcoming African American fathers.

### Practice 5: Become Culturally Competent

The Black dads have organized a focus group, wanting to express their mixed feelings about their children's success in school. "Like I know the stuff that we do in the community and whatever, we don't do it to get patted on the back or to get media coverage or anything like that," Zion says. "But I wish they would show more that Black men and Black fathers do in the community positively. You know, they, they just don't show it, man."

Zion laughs as he finishes his statement. The fathers are happy about how their children are growing and developing—but not at the expense of their Black identity. Together, the men examine various systems of oppression built into the school and formulate plans to change them.

In describing how multicultural books impact children, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) has written about providing "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors": mirrors so that children can see themselves represented in literary texts and dolls and artifacts around the classroom (Sturdivant & Alanís 2021); windows to help all children learn about others; and sliding glass doors as a means to leave the comfort of the known and familiar and step out into the world others occupy. As long as we insist that Black fathers come to educational settings to look and act like the Eurocentric, middle-class version of fatherhood, we are lacking in the cultural competence that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion (NAEYC 2019). Ignoring cultural differences implies that the dominant cultural view is preferred, more excellent, and to be aspired

to. Promoting colorblindness does not mean treating everyone the same (NAEYC 2020). It instead erases parts of each of us, identities that inform and direct our view of the world from a very early age. Colorblindness impairs teachers' ability to truly see a child as a member of their cultural context.

### Action Steps

1. Representation matters in teaching, learning, and relationships. Be intentional about including all fathers in your program. Ask them in as many different ways as it takes to include them.
2. Analyze the images of Black fathers that families receive from your setting. Include not just pictures, but expectations and conditions for engaging.

### Reflection Questions

1. How does an increasing awareness of race and racism affect your appreciation and value of your own culture and upbringing?
2. In what ways do you actively recognize the positive role models that Black fathers represent? The best step to take to help the children of Black fathers is to boldly step through the sliding glass door and become competent in the cultural context of each child.

## Closing the Deal

Welcoming new families into our schools and programs is not a one-time act, nor will it look the same for all families. The five practices shared in this article can guide your transformation as a culturally competent educator and setting. You can use the action steps and reflection questions to gather together the Black fathers in your program and to lead all toward greater cultural competence.





## About the Authors

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So, as you begin to prepare the admission packets and set up the digital apps for family communication, billing, attendance, and sharing videos of live action from the classroom, consider how to ask Black fathers to collaborate in establishing a stimulating learning environment that taps into all of the knowledge these men bring to their children's development. Be open to learn from these men, and invite them to bring in their authentic selves and "real world lessons." Be curious about their safe havens such as barbershops and backyard barbecues. Consider working together to provide the entire class or program with culturally competent lessons led by these men. Let them know that you see them as Black men, Black fathers, Black educators, and nurturers who care about the development of their young Black children.

Finally (though this is really the first thing to do), ask! Ask them to be the key player in their children's development in the early childhood space just as they are outside of the classroom. Ask them for their guidance about being culturally responsive in their children's education. And ask them to show up in the classroom and program, just as they are. Do not be surprised if over 200 Black fathers show up.

References for this article can be found online at [NAEYC.org/yc/winter2022](https://naeyc.org/yc/winter2022).