

Family Interviews for MLs

Building Trust and Mutual Understanding

Potential Questions to Ask the Families of Multilingual Learners

Administrative Units, Districts, and Schools often observe patterns of the “surface culture” and linguistic differences which can lead educators to make erroneous inferences about the child (Hammond, 2015). Families can provide school teams with valuable insights into their children’s abilities, experiences, values, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez 2005).

School teams should engage families meaningfully as partners in the problem-solving and special education processes. When working with the families of Multilingual Learners, teams should:

1. Identify a point person who will be responsible for communicating with the family,
2. Establish clear protocols for bidirectional communication with the family including how to request an interpreter for formal and informal conversations,
3. Work to build trust and mutual understanding, and
4. Conduct informal interviews to gather anecdotal data about the student.

The following interview questions are meant to be used as a resource when the multidisciplinary team needs information related to a student’s cultural background, academic profile, prior experiences, etc., in addition to that of the Home Language Survey/Home Language Questionnaire results. These questions can be helpful for teams including educators knowledgeable about English Language Development/Acquisition and acculturation. Questions in the areas listed below can be especially useful for educators working with Multilingual Learners who are new to a school and those who are Newcomers. Teams can conduct interviews using some or all of the questions, as appropriate when beginning the Response to Intervention (RtI) process and/or before the referral for a Special Education Evaluation and to support the accurate identification of Multilingual Learners suspected of having educational disabilities upon enrollment. This is by no means an exhaustive list of questions, nor is it the intention that all of the questions be used for every family. The purpose of this interview should be explained to the family’s satisfaction and comfort level. The interview should be conducted in the family’s home or preferred language and whenever possible in a face-to-face format, and in a neutral location. The family’s responses and interviewer observations should be written down, and stored securely, and information gathered should be shared with the multidisciplinary team.

Experiences, Expectations, and Values:

- What do you hope your child will gain from their education in school?
- What have you been told about how to support your child’s education at home, especially regarding English language development?
- What have you been told about how our school functions to address learning challenges for students?
- What do you notice about the differences between the school system here and the school system in your home country (if applicable)?
- What successes and challenges has your child experienced in adapting to this school?

- What differences have you noticed about your child’s education here as opposed to their prior school experiences?
- What differences have you noticed about life in the United States vs. your home country?
- What can you tell me about your student that you think I should know?

Student, Family, and Community Language Use:

- What language does each family member generally use when communicating with the student?
- What language does the child generally use to communicate with each family member?
- What languages does the child appear the most confident speaking and/or writing, and understanding and/or reading?
- What language does the child appear to prefer?
- Does the child use one language more than another?
- What language(s) does the child generally use when communicating with extended family members and/or community members?

Academic History:

- Has the child attended school outside of the United States?
 - In what language(s) was instruction provided?
 - Was the student enrolled in any special programming (i.e. early intervention, special education, gifted, etc?)
- Was there any interruption to the student’s schooling? (Suggestion: map out a visual timeline with the family)
- Describe your child’s prior experiences in schooling.
- Do you have any transcripts or educational evaluation information that you would be willing to share with the school?

Students with Suspected or Existing Needs:

*Already identified with an educational disability, low incidence disabilities, medical diagnosis, or parental/staff concerns

- How do you communicate with your child? (verbally, sign language, gestures, pictures, assistive technology, etc.)
- How does your child communicate with you (assistive technology, verbally, sign, language, gestures, pictures, etc.)
- How well do you believe your child understands spoken or written information in the home or preferred language?
- How well can your child express their needs, ideas, and wants in your home or preferred language, as compared to their siblings or other children of the same age in your community?
- Can your child follow 1, 2, or 3-step instructions in the home or preferred language?
- Can your child follow 1, 2, or 3-step instructions in English?

Best Practices for Interviewing Family Members:

- a. Use open-ended questions. Start questions with the words, “what,” “how,” “tell me about,” “describe,” etc.
- b. Ask for use instead of meaning. Instead of asking, “What do you mean by...?” ask “Can you give me an example of ...?”
- c. Restate what the interviewee says word for word.
- d. Summarize remarks to give space for clarification.
- e. Avoid multiple questions at once.
- f. Avoid leading questions. Instead of asking “Do you think...?” ask “What do you think..?”
- g. Avoid using “why” questions. “Why” questions can feel intrusive or interrogatory and might limit a family’s response.
- h. Beware of confirmation bias. When an interviewer enters a conversation assuming that they know what they will find, they will be less likely to pick up on the important details of the conversation.
- i. Ensure that the interpreter (if applicable) has had a chance to review the questions beforehand.

PLEASE NOTE: Schools must never inquire about an individual or a family’s immigration status. If the family offers this information, you must keep it confidential and do not document or disclose it for any reason. See [2014 Immigrant Dear Colleague Letter](#).

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

[Empathy Interviews](#)

[Tennessee Department of Education Ethnographic Interview](#)

[Office of English Language Arts \(OELA\) English Learner Toolkit Chapter 10](#)