Family Case Studies  
CLDDEV 109  
Child, Family and Community

Presented are ten families who, in spite of a number of pressures in their lives, are also struggling along the path to become successful families. Some are much farther along than others, but stress is a theme in all of their lives. One thing that these ten families have in common is that all are enrolled in the same early care and education program.

Sara’s Family

Sara was a teen parent when she had Ty four year ago; now she is 20. Ty and his 2-year-old brother, Kyle, are both in the center because Sara is in the nursing school at the local community college. Sara has had a hard time of it since she became a mother at 16. She lived with her mother for the first couple of years, but they argued over how she was raising Ty, and Sara left to join the homeless population of her city. She and Ty lived for awhile in her car until the poor old car quit running, sat in one place too long, and got towed. Then she lived under a bridge between the highway and the river. Pregnant again (as a result of being raped), hungry, and desperate, she finally found a social worker in an agency that hooked her up to some of the services available in her community. Now, Sara is in nursing school, and life is better, but it still isn’t easy. She has financial aid and a place to live, but she’s going crazy trying to go to school all day, study all night, and raise her boys at the same time. They reflect her stress and have stresses of their own. Ty seems to have an attention deficit problem; although the teachers in the center are working with him, he moves from one activity to another so fast that it’s hard to keep track of him. He never seems to settle down and becomes frustrated very easily when he tries to do something. The result is that he throws regular temper tantrums. Kyle appears to be a very sweet child, cuddling up to the teachers whenever he gets the chance. But his brother beats on him, which is starting to make him aggressive toward other children. He has to be watched all the time because he bites. The staff is thinking of putting him in one of the satellite family child care homes available to the center because the stimulation of the center seems to be too much for him to handle. Sara is learning about communication, discipline, and family relations from a parenting class and from her therapist. She doesn’t feel successful as a family head, but she feels she is moving in the right direction.

Roberto’s Family

Roberto has a 4-year-old daughter, Lupe, in the local Head Start program in the morning, and she comes to this center in the afternoon. Roberto transports her from one program to the other when his old pickup is running and he’s not working. Otherwise, his wife, Maria, who takes classes in English as a second language at the adult school, uses the bus to pick up Lupe and deliver her to the center. Maria takes their baby, Paco, with her in the morning to class, where they have child care, but she brings Paco to the center in the afternoon while she cleans houses to support the family. Roberto does odd jobs when he can get them and has been looking for steady work for some time. Lupe has a hearing loss, and the teachers in the center keep telling Maria and Roberto that they must take her to see a specialist. They went once but there were so many papers to fill
out and no one was there to translate for them—so they walked out and haven't gone back. The center staff is working to find them a translator so they can get the help that Lupe needs, but so far they haven't found one. Maria is very worried about Lupe, and so is Roberto, but he is hesitant to put his name on any kind of papers that might bring him to the attention of the government. He doesn't trust what might happen once the government becomes aware of him. It was bad enough signing up for Head Start and child care, but at least those papers were in Spanish and he knew what he was signing. He didn't have to depend on someone with limited Spanish trying to explain them to him. His neighbor tells him he's being paranoid about this, but Roberto's family has had some bad experiences with government officials, and he doesn't want to repeat them. Roberto is wary! Roberto has never thought about whether his is a “successful” family or not. He's too involved in the daily struggle for survival. He is anxious that his family live according to the traditions he grew up with, but he sees all of them being changed as the different cultures rub up against each other. He resists that change but at the same time, he appreciates what he and Maria are learning from their involvement with Head Start and the child care center. They are anxious to retain their culture and be the best parents they can be!

Junior's Family

The most vocal of the third family is 12-month-old Junior. He cries all the time. The staff at the child care center tries hard to comfort him, but what works with other children doesn't work with Junior. The whole family—refugees from their homeland—are obviously suffering from having to flee but the loudest sufferer is Junior. The center staff have never had a baby in the program who has been so unhappy for so long. He cries all day, every day, except when he is sleeping. The staff doesn't know too much about Junior's family, except that they live with a number of relatives in a small house that they're pooling their money to buy. Although the house is crowded during the weekends, during the day there is no one home to care for Junior. Everyone's out working. Great-grandma used to take care of him, but she's sick now and can barely care for herself. Perhaps he misses her, and that's why he cries so much. Language must be a problem for Junior too. No one in the center knows more than a word or two of his language, and that must be very scary for him. He doesn't stop crying long enough to listen and hear English. The staff has tried to find out about Junior's diet, but his mother is very vague. She doesn't speak English well, so she leaves food decisions up to staff. The center is anxious to provide any special cultural or family food preferences to Junior. Like Roberto's family, Junior's family is also rubbing up against other cultures, but are so busy surviving in the new country, with a different culture and different languages, that they are in culture shock. They are still reacting to what is new and strange to them, and they are not yet able to take in any benefits from the broadened experience.

Michael's Family

The fourth family has one child enrolled in the center. Three-year-old Michael is a quiet boy with long dark eyelashes that sweep down on his cheeks when he lowers his eyes, which he does a good deal of the time. He is cautious and slow to warm up to people, but his slightly withdrawn manner has captured the hearts of the staff. Michael's parents, Margaret and Beth, are a lesbian couple. Although the child comes every day, the staff has barely talked to his parents. They seem to move in and out of the center like shadows. Margaret usually brings Michael. She is friendly to staff but always in a hurry. Staff members have mixed feelings about this couple, several are glad the two women are so unobtrusive and seemingly unwilling to engage in conversation. However,
one staff member has strong feelings about bias this family may be experiencing in the center. She wants to change the atmosphere and make sure the child and his family feel accepted. She has begun to introduce the subject of antibias regularly at staff meetings, and this has brought forth some discomfort among staff. At the last meeting she pointed out that although the center is committed to “celebrating diversity” there is no physical evidence at the center that lesbian and gay couples are considered “normal” families. Pictures are displayed on wall and in books that show all kinds of family configurations, except same sex parents. No books at the center show gay or lesbian families. “What can we do to make school more comfortable for and accepting of Michael and his family?” the teacher said to the rest of the staff. “Good question” responded another teacher, “This is something we should talk about. I’m concerned about Michael.” “I’m concerned about his parents as well” said the first teacher. “What can we do to raise their comfort level?” The staff is still working on this question because they are in conflict with one another and what should be done. Some feel strongly that it is an equity issue they are discussing; others are taking a moral or religious stance. In the meantime it’s easy to see the discomfort in Michael and his parents as the pick up unspoken messages from various staff members. Although Michael’s parents have many traits of a successful family, they are unable to benefit from what the staff may have to offer them to increase their knowledge of child development and family relations because of limited communication.

Courtney’s Family

Courtney’s family commands a good deal of staff attention for all sorts of reasons. Courtney, the mother, has been married before, and two of her four children are in the program. Tristan, her 4-year-old, was abused by his father, and the family lives in fear that one day the father will arrive at school and take off with him. The staff have been warned of the situation and is aware of the restraining order that gives them the authority to refuse to let the father take Tristan. Tristan, after all his negative experiences, is fearful of men—and he doesn’t get along with the other children either. Courtney, Tristan’s mother, a European American, is married to Richard, who is Native American. They have their own child, a 2-year-old named Soliel. Tristan’s half sister looks more like her father than her mother, and her beauty is remarkable. Adults passing the center stop to discuss how beautiful she is. Soliel is remarkable in other ways too. She is intelligently mature far beyond her years, but socially she’s still a baby. She confuses adults, who don’t know what to think of her. They marvel at the way she is teaching herself to read but become distressed by the fact that she kicks, screams and even bites when a child refuses to give her a toy that she wants to play with. Courtney is in a drug recovery program and has just decided to continue her education. She wants to become a lawyer. Richard works in construction and is going to college part-time to become a history teacher. He has very strong feelings about his heritage, which the teachers found out about last Thanksgiving when they put up pictures of Pilgrims and Indians on the walls. One of the teachers was putting the last picture up when Richard arrived with Tristan and Soliel. He stopped, stared intently, then turned abruptly to the teacher and said, “It's offensive to me that you're using caricatures of my people as decorations. It feels like you're making fun of my culture.” The teacher stopped, shocked by his words. “I don’t understand. Thanksgiving stands for friendship and love. That's what these pictures are about...people helping people.” “Maybe that's the way you see it”, explained Richard, “but I see you’re celebrating a day that marks the beginning of the genocide of my people. I don’t want my children to have any part of that celebration.” He left the room abruptly, taking the children with him. During nap time the other teachers were shocked to hear such a different version of the happy holiday they had always celebrated. They took the
pictures down and agreed to stress the harvest aspects of Thanksgiving rather than giving it a “historical” slant. Richard hear about this from Courtney who took the children back to the center later in the day. When he arrived the next morning to drop the children off, he remarked about the missing pictures to Tristan’s teacher expressing his gratitude about the staff’s willingness to see his point of view and make some changes in the celebration. As a cross-cultural family, Courtney and Richard are exploring where their concepts of a successful family coincide and where they collide.

Smith Family

Holidays are a big issue for the sixth family—the Smith’s—as well. They have three children in the program and are pleased with everything but the celebration of what they consider Christian holidays. At a recent family meeting they got caught in the middle of an argument between two groups of families. It started when Mrs. Smith asked the staff to downplay religious celebrations. “I don’t want my children to learn someone else’s religion. We’ll teach religion at home, so please leave religious observances out of the program.” One parent answered her by insisting the Christmas had nothing to do with religion. Two other parents rose to their feet, arguing loudly that is was a terrible shame that Christ had been removed from Christmas and that there ought to be more religion in the center rather than less. When the director finally got the families to calm down, Mrs. Smith spoke up again, this time about dietary differences. She was concerned that her children were being fed food that violated the dietary restrictions of her religion. She spoke politely and with great concern. The director asked her to make an appointment for another time to discuss the problem. Mrs. Smith arrived the next day at the agreed on time and found the director in the office waiting for her. The two had met before here earlier: before the family came into the program, they had had several discussions about whether the oldest Smith child, who has spina bifida, could be accommodated in his wheelchair. Several modifications to the environment were required, which Mr. Smith worked on with the help of Sara and Richard, who both have carpentry skills. Mrs. Smith and the director expected to have a good talk this time, because they had gotten along so well in the past. Mrs. Smith expressed her feelings about the staff not watching what her children ate, and the director promised to do all she could to be sure the Smith children were monitored at meal and snack times. She also asked Mrs. Smith if she would be willing to do a cooking activity with the 4-year-old group and teach them how to make one of the special dishes of her culture. She agreed, and that was the beginning of her involvement in the program. At present Mrs. Smith is working night and day on a big fund-raiser for a climbing structure for the play yard. She’s finding it very satisfying to use her talent, skills and connections in the community to benefit the program and children, some of whom she realizes are severely financially deprived. She has involved a number of other families, and they are getting to know and appreciate each other in ways that only come from working together toward a common goal—something they could never have done by just attending parent meetings. The Smith’s have a lot going for them as a successful family. But, like the rest of the families, they still have a way to go.

Lambert Family

Mrs. Lambert wants to speak to you after picking up her daughter at the center. She tells you that her husband has been laid off and his unemployment checks will stop next week. She can’t pay the tuition at the center, and she has no place to leave her daughter while she works. She must work to pay the rent and buy food. She hopes her husband will find work soon (he spends all day looking), since the father lost his job. They have several doctor bills to pay for a severe ear
infection their daughter had last month. The family car’s tire treads are so worn that driving is unsafe, yet the car is the family’s only means of transportation to work, the center and the store. Mrs. Lambert is terrified of having her family become homeless.

**Sullivan Family**

Brian is a child who just missed the cut-off date for kindergarten entry. He turned 5 years old December 15th. His behavior in class is causing problems for you and for the other children and families. He has difficulty sitting still, playing attention for extended periods, completing any activities, and keeping his hands to himself. Brian is very easily frustrated, cries often and is prone to temper tantrums and aggression. Brian’s mother, Cindy, is a single parent and has experienced the same problems with Brian at home. In addition, Brian does not seem to recognize a single letter of the alphabet and you are concerned with his pre-reading skills. Cindy works two jobs to make ends meet and Brian goes to another sitter in the evening when Cindy’s second shift starts. Brian seems to miss his mother and talks about her often.

**Nguyen Family**

A child enters your preschool class the first day and speaks no English. You wait for a family member to pick him up because you did not enroll this family and have no history of the child. The mother arrives and speaks very little English. You use simple words, gestures and even draw pictures to communicate with this mother. You learn that this family has just arrived from Vietnam and no one speaks fluent English. The father works in a warehouse and the mother is expecting another child in about three months. The family is very anxious to learn English and become American. The adults in the family know no other people in the community. They found the preschool by walking around the neighborhood. The mother has not had any prenatal medical care.

**Katie’s Family**

You are especially worried about this child in your class. She always arrives at least 30 minutes early in the morning, is always very hungry and does not dress appropriately. It's winter time and she rarely wears socks or a jacket. A few times you have noticed bruises on her arms but the mother explains away the bruises by saying she falls a lot, even though she is four years old. Katie is a very quiet child who causes no problems in the classroom and seems very eager to please you, the teacher. She has never talked about her bruises, even when questioned. You are not sure what you should do. Her mother is always in a rush when she picks Katie up and she never seems to have time to chat with you, even though you have explained that pick up time is an important time to talk about the day. You are afraid that if you say something about Katie’s early arrival that she won’t get fed before school opens, which is when you make sure she has extra food before the other children arrive. One day you notice that Katie and her mother are parked in the parking lot before you arrive and Katie’s mother tells you that they have been living in their car.