**Understanding Family Diversity and Home-School Relations**

**By**

**Radhika Holmström and Gianna Knowles**

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**Introduction**

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*We have found overwhelming evidence that children’s life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life. It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money (Field 2010 p5).*

In 2010 the British government published *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances* (Field 2010). The quote above details one of the main findings from the Field (2010) report. The report goes on to explore how the family unit children grow-up in is one of the central factors in determining a child’s future life experience. The report also discusses the importance of good educational provision from the earliest years in enhancing a child’s future well-being and life-chances. From this report we can see how necessary it is, for children to thrive as adults, that those working with children in educational settings work with children’s family backgrounds to make certain EY settings, schools and families are all working together to ensure children can make the most from the educational opportunities they are presented with.

Before a child enters any educational setting it has already learnt many things from its family. From the very first moments of life children begin to learn how to live in the society they are growing-up into. As they develop children learn the attitudes values and beliefs their family holds and these will come to the EY setting and primary school with them, they will impact on the day-to-day experiences of a child’s early life and often these influences will carry-on into adulthood and be a hugely determining feature of a child’s whole life. As Field states: *a child’s home environment affects their chances of being ready to take full advantage of their schooling* (Field 2010 p5). Most families are very keen to be involved in their children’s education, however, sometimes there can be a mismatch between the EY setting’s or school’s view of what should be happening under the umbrella term of education. Where these tensions arise families can feel their values and beliefs about education are being ignored or marginalised and the settings and schools can feel the families are being difficult, or do not care about the education of their children. There are many reasons why tensions over education between settings, schools and families can occur, one of them being settings and schools may not fully appreciate the nature of the family background supporting the child and therefore not understand how best to engage with that family.

For many years there has been a common widespread assumption that when the term family is used, what that term means is *a particular type of relationship and parenting.....a heterosexual union within marriage (Chambers 2001 p6),* where the children in the family are from that heterosexual marriage and, ideally, the father in the family goes out to work while the mother’s role is to be the homemaker. Indeed many families are constituted in this way, as Chamber (2001) goes on to discuss. However, what Chambers (2001) also raises is the idea that this type of family arrangement *has only ever existed as a transitional phase of some people’s lives (Chambers 2001 p1)* and that what is more often the case is that the term *family* actually refers to *a variety of living arrangements....being experienced in western nations, including some complex multiple-occupancy households that have not, as yet, been given a satisfactory label (ibid).* It is the relationship between EYs settings, school and these *complex multiple-occupancy households,* or families which this book seeks to explore. Settings and schools are very practiced at working alongside conventional families to promote children’s learning, but sometimes forget to consider the ways in which other family groups need to be engaged to ensure the education of children from these families is also being promoted. Notions of family that depart from the dominant discourse of the ‘traditional’ nuclear family module a concept discussed in chapter 1 of this book can often be overlooked or depicted in quite negative terms: notably, the effects of living in a single parent family, or the comparatively poor educational achievements of white working-class and/or black African Caribbean boys. In practice, as many working in EY setting and schools are aware, it is more complicated than this. Children come from a huge range of families, and their family makeup interacts with their experience of education in complex ways.

A further reason we need to consider ensuring that children get the best educational start in life is that, as we will discuss later in the book, research has also shown that education can provide children and young people with social mobility and impacts on their capacity to achieve well-being as an adult, including economic well-being.

It is also important to remember that children are not passive in the experience of being a child and growing-up. As Brannen discusses children are: *reflexive, moral agents themselves (Brannen 2000 p.10).* That is to say, children have views and opinions and develop autonomously in response to what is happening around them. They *make sense of their experiences of parents’ care and how they, as active co-contributors to care, interpret moral imperatives to care for, and to cooperate with, others (ibid).* Children learn about life and how to behave and treat others, they learn what is of value, what attitudes and beliefs to hold in response to the behaviours, values, attitudes and beliefs of those around them – both those who are family members and those they meet in educational settings. And while *children may also have view* both about *the nature of parenthood and parenting,* they will also hold views about *what it means to be a ‘*child’ and about the education they are receiving *(Brannen 2000 p.10)*

Sometimes books on families are not books about families. They are books structuring the discourse on family through promoting a particular model of what a family is. One of the results of having a rigid model of how a family should be is that those families that do not reflect this model, either because they cannot or will not, is that they are pathologised as aberrant or failing families. What this book aims to do is not to present a fixed notion of what a family should be, but to explore how families really are and to celebrate the strengths that are within those families. Most families will, at some time, experience stresses that will impact on all family members, including the children in those families. Sometimes there has been a temptation to believe that if only the family fitted the nuclear family model these stresses would go away, rather than recognising that it is not how the family is constituted that is the issue, but those factors causing the stress. This book explores families and the challenging circumstances that many families live with; it does this to seek to enable those who working in schools to better understand how to build relationships with families that support children’s learning and achievement in school.

For these reasons, this book aims to help students and those already working in the children’s workforce understand both theoretically and practically, what may constitute a ‘family’ and how to build relationships with a child’s family so the setting or school is working in partnership with the home environment to support learning. Central to many of the discussions in this book are the themes of identity and belonging, attachment and loss. For many human beings, achieving well-being as an adult is linked to having a sense of identity, an understanding of who they are and how they belong to and fit within the community and society they live in. Similarly to flourish, human beings need to be attached to and belong to other groups of human beings and to be able to form secure attachment with those around them. Many adults who did not have the opportunities to develop a sense of identity or form strong attachments, or who suffered loss as children and were unsupported in overcoming that loss, struggle to achieve well-being as adults. Families are where children learn about who they are, where they come from and the history and cultures they belong to. For a huge majority of children, leaving aside the normal ups and downs of family life; their families are also places where they learn to form strong and positive attachments and, where necessary to grieve for losses they have suffered.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring the whole notion of what is meant by the term ‘family’ and why the concept of family is of enduring importance for children and society. It introduces the notion of attachment and discusses how children need to form secure attachments to enable them to thrive as adults. The chapter also introduces the idea the notion of social capital can be such a significant factor in educational achievement.

Having discussed the role of the family in enabling children to flourish, chapter 2 discusses the wider social dimension of families. That is, how families give children a sense of identity and teach them about their cultural heritage. The chapter explores what is sometimes seen as the tension between developing and individual identity and having social responsibility and tensions in wider society with regard to cultural diversity, gender, identity, and achievement in learning.

Chapter 3 is the first chapter that begins to look at these wider themes in terms of how they might relate to some specific family units, beginning with Mixed Race families. The chapter explore what is meant by the term mixed race and how ‘mixed race’ as a category is a growing ethnic group in the UK today. It examines the stereotypes and assumptions about mixed race children, their families and their educational attainments and the challenge, for some children of being ‘mixed race’ and establishing an identity.

Some children in the UK experience life as an immigrant, asylum seeker or refugee. Chapter 4 discusses the experience of these children and explores how being a refugee or asylum seeker is different to being an immigrant. It looks at a recent history of migration to Britain and across Europe and the more recent arrival in the UK from Eastern Europe. It discusses who migrates to the UK and why and then begins to look at why families seek refuge or asylum.

Chapter 5 discusses step-families and step-parenting and how one in three people are in a step-family situation. It explores what is meant by step-parenting and step-families and the range and complexity of having ‘step’ relations. It discusses how children deal with disrupted attachments and form new attachments as families break-up and reform, and how many children suffer feelings of loss as they go through this process. The chapter examines how dominant discourses about ‘nuclear families’ can marginalise the experience of those living in step-families and the challenges of staying in-touch with family members from previous families.

In chapter 6 what it means to be a Gay or Lesbian families and Gay and Lesbian Parenting is explored. In particular the chapter looks at the background and the facts about Gay and Lesbian families, as compared to some of the media myths that surround such families. It discusses how Gay and families may be formed through surrogacy, artificial insemination and adoption and how individuals might work out roles and relationships in Gay and Lesbian families. Many children and adults in such families find that they have to deal with other people’s assumptions, discrimination and complex legislative framework and other people’s reactions to their civil partnerships. It explores how some families in this situation may choose to be open about how their family is constituted, while others will keep their relationships very private.

The issue families, disability and mental health are discussed in chapter 7. In particular the chapter explores what is meant by the term disability including mental health challenges and explores how families experience disability. It looks at how adults and children experience having a disability, the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. It considers how having a disabled sibling, being a child carer or being a disabled parent can impact of the educational achievement of children. And how disability in the family can lead to discrimination, poverty and hate crime the prejudice experienced by some families

For some children family life breaks down and they may be placed with foster families or live in other care situations. Chapter 8 discusses the number of children being fostered or who are in other forms of care and the impact of being a child in care on learning and achievement. It explores fostering and how to support fostered children and foster families. It explains why some children need to be children in care and challenges children in care face in the education system.

Chapter 9 follows on from the previous chapter and explores families and adoption, discussing in particular what we mean by the term adoption and what it means for a child to be adopted. It looks at reasons why children in the UK enter the adoption system, who can adopt and children’s right to contact with birth parents. The chapter explores inter-country adoption and how children deal with the loss of birth families and form attachments to new families. In its final section the chapter looks at working with adoptive parents and adopted children’s experience in the education system

Chapter 10 discusses the issue of families living in poverty, exploring what it means for a child to live in poverty and how poverty impacts on, social mobility, social capital and long-term *life chances*. It discusses who is more at risk of living in poverty and how we can prevent poor children from becoming poor adults.

The final chapter in the book, chapter 11 explores families and bereavement, looking at the incidence of children who are bereaved, having lost a close family member. It discusses the stages of grief and why being bereaved can have such an impacts on learning. The chapter examines cultural and gender differences in dealing with bereavement and how to help a child cope when they lose a parent or sibling. Supporting children bereaved by a death due to Suicide or experiencing loss due to family breakdown is also explored.