

Cultural Awareness and Interactions with Families

Janice is a 2 year-old girl who has Down syndrome. She is the youngest of three children in a traditional Native American family and lives with her two brothers, her mother, father, grandmother and aunt. She has been receiving center-based speech and motor services in a special purpose program. In two weeks she will be attending a local child care center. Many of the children there will be going to the same elementary school with Janice when she is 5.

Mrs. Small is a new ITDS and will be assisting Janice in her transition to a child care setting. She is looking forward to working with Mrs. Beals, the child care proprietor and with Janice's family. In anticipation of Janice attending child care, Mrs. Small scheduled a visit with Janice's family to talk about the process and what would be put in place to support Janice. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers met Mrs. Small at the door. Janice's aunt and grandmother were not home. As soon as she sat down, Mrs. Small told Mr. and Mrs. Rivers how excited she was to be working with Janice and proceeded to tell them all the plans she had for Janice in her new placement. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers listened politely, not saying much. Janice spent most of this time running around the room and trying to look in Mrs. Small's purse. She paid little attention when her mother quietly reprimanded her.

Mrs. Small was surprised that Mr. and Mrs. Rivers did not ask questions about Janice's new placement. She wondered if they were interested or just didn't care about this new opportunity for Janice to be with other children as socialization and learning models. Watching Janice's behavior and how unresponsive she was to her mother's requests to be quiet, Mrs. Small also began to worry how Janice would act in the child care setting. She feared Janice's behaviors would negatively affect her success there.

Mrs. Small told Mr. and Mrs. Rivers that she had scheduled some new assessments for Janice in two weeks. She was pleased with herself that she had allowed plenty of time for the parents to re-arrange their schedules if they needed to in order to be at the assessments. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers just looked at each other and did not say anything. Janice was supposed to participate with other young children for the first time at the harvest ceremony the day the assessments were scheduled.

When Mrs. Small got back to her agency, she stopped in Mrs. White Elk's office to talk with her about the visit to the River's home. Mrs. White Elk was the family liaison who did outreach work in the community and also acted as an interpreter during meetings when necessary. Mrs. Small related the events of the visit and expressed her concerns. She sensed something was wrong, and thought she might be dealing with "difficult" parents. "They just didn't seem very interested or excited about what I planned, and although I tried to schedule the assessment far ahead, they didn't act like they appreciated it at all." She asked Mrs. White Elk to help her figure it out.

Mrs. White Elk told her that the most important thing to do was develop a sense of trust and respect between her and the family. To do this she needed to approach them in a way that respected their culture. She needed to develop the comfort level of the family by giving them time to know her, engaging in small talk, asking questions about what is important to them, allowing for periods of silence and waiting patiently for responses. Coming in and taking over the conversation and sharing a long list of activities she was going to do with Janice probably overwhelmed the family.

Mrs. White Elk also told Mrs. Small of the importance of the role of the extended family in helping to raise children and said that she guessed Janice's behavior would have been much better if her grandmother were present, since grandparents often were responsible for discipline in the family.

When told about their lack of enthusiasm around the assessments, Mrs. White Elk said, "That's the second day of the harvest celebration. I'm sure they will be at that." She gave Mrs. Small some more pointers on how to interact successfully with the family and Mrs. Small left eager to try a new approach when she met with Mr. and Mrs. Rivers again.

Issues:

- Mr. and Mrs. Rivers and Mrs. Small wanted Janice to be successful in her new childcare setting. A way must be found to assure they work together on this goal.
- By not understanding the cultural factors that influence Native American interactions, Mrs. Small made it difficult to build the bridge between Early Steps and home.
- Effective two-way communication is essential for family/professional partnerships.
- How a professional approaches a family has a great impact (positive or negative) on the success of the interactions.

Things to Think About:

- What could Mrs. Small have done differently at that first meeting to begin to build a bridge with the family?
- How should she approach the next meeting?
- What should she do about the scheduled assessments?
- What can Mrs. Small do to address behavior issues that may arise with Janice in the childcare setting?

Used courtesy of Dr. Susan Donovan, faculty member at the University of Central Florida.