

## WHAT'S IN A NAME

Since I am of a culturally and linguistically diverse background, English is not my first language and my name is difficult to pronounce. I abbreviate it and let people mispronounce it any way they want to. However, I feel important and happy when people spend time and effort and gently insist I teach them how to say it and spell my name. Children feel especially valued when this happens. I would recommend to apply this 'Let's focus on your name' strategy with people who have an unusual name.

Here I describe one strategy that early childhood staff can use to help children to value the diversity that exists in the world around them - on a small scale – their friendships with children with unusual names and of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

A recent survey (Let's play Fair Evaluation Report 2001) of preschool age children indicates that they chose playmates according to familiarity of appearance and perceived friendliness. It is helpful to encourage every child to build a strong and confident self- identity as well as an informed and proud group- identity.

The book that I recommend addresses the topic of self- identity in a sensitive way. *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes, is a story about a little mouse who has always thought her name was perfect until she begins school. It is there she discovers that she is the only one with a very long and unusual name, for which she is constantly being teased.

After reading the story, staff can encourage the children to discuss how *Chrysanthemum* felt, and find out if anyone has ever had a similar experience when their name made them feel unusual.

To expand the topic, staff also can ask the children to imagine that they could talk to the main character and to think about one question that they would like to ask her. This activity can be done in the form of role-play or interview.

Preschool aged children could be helped to write their names on a small index cards, counting the numbers of letters in their first name, comparing the longest/ shortest numbers of letters, how to spell their names etc...

Last but not least involve the family in the exploration of names. Staff can encourage the children to ask their parents, carers such questions as:

'Am I named after someone?'

'Does my name have a special meaning?'

'Do I have a nick name?'

'Has anyone ever mispronounced my name?'

The book *Chrysanthemum* is available for borrowing from Diversity Directions Resource Centre.

Happy reading!  
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