Tips for Creating Materials for a Low-Literacy Families

Information
- Only include what the family NEEDS to know. Leave out things that you would like them to know but that are not necessary for getting your point across.
- The message should be short, direct and specific.
- Apply the material to the families’ typical situation to make it more meaningful.
- Try to provide direct, how-to information.
- Avoid statistics.

Organization
- Be consistent in the way the material is organized and formatted throughout the document.
- Sequence information logically. This can be done using numbers or categories of information.
- When possible, organize the material using simple, clear headers.
  - Break complex ideas down into sub ideas and sub headings.
  - Short explanatory headings are better than single word headings, which may be confusing.
    - Single Word Heading: Breakfast
    - Explanatory Heading: Breakfast Meal Plans
  - Put the first bullet or point on the line directly below the header.
  - If desired, underline or bold the header. Do not use italics.
  - Use a mix of lower and upper case letters. DON’T USE ALL CAPS!
- Present only one idea at a time.
- Try to keep each idea to one page.
- Put important information either first or last.
- Summarize and repeat important information.

Visuals
- Whenever possible, use visuals to explain headings and important information.
- Use visuals that directly relate to the information. Visuals should be direct and informative, not just attractive.
- Place the illustration next to the text it is describing.
- Use simple illustrations. Line drawings that do not contain extra detail work well.
- Illustrations should be realistic so that the provider, center staff or parents can identify with them.
- Use captions or text to tell readers what to look for in the illustrations. Different people may interpret the same picture differently.
- Circles and arrows are very useful in pointing out key information.

Format and Layout
- Use capital and lower-case lettering; using all capital letters is difficult to read.
- Do not use right justification (where all words on the right side are aligned).

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• Avoid putting the first word of a sentence as the last word on a line. Also, (that was an example), avoid putting the last word in a sentence as the first word on a line.
• To highlight a word or passage, bold or underline it. Italics are hard to read.
• Use at least 12 point font.
• Use a light background with darker text.
• Use thin lettering without curls.
• Avoid lengthy lists.
• Start each paragraph on a new line and skip lines between paragraphs. Do not indent paragraphs.
• Paragraphs should not be more than 60 words.

Wording
• Use everyday language, including phrases and words that the family would use, whenever appropriate.
• Clearly define any new words.
• Repeating new words at short intervals can help make them familiar.
• Use short, non-technical words of two syllables or less.
• Use words with single meaning. For example, “poor” could mean having little money or it could mean unskilled.
• Avoid abbreviations, contractions, acronyms, unfamiliar spellings of words, and quotation marks.

Sentence Structure
• Use the active voice instead of the passive voice. For example,
  o Active – I ran.
  o Passive – I went running.
  o Active – Mary found the penny.
  o Passive – The penny was found by Mary.
• Sentences of 8-10 words are best. Never use sentences longer than 25 words.
• Use positive statements. For example,
  o Positive: Always eat breakfast.
  o Negative: Do not skip breakfast.