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Ages and Stages with a Cultural Perspective in Mind

Adapted from Ages and Stages with a Cultural Perspective in Mind, a workshop package developed by Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre for BC Child Care Resource and Referral Programs.

To be culturally responsive is not to know everything about every culture of the children and families with whom you work. It is being open to learning about the values and customs of the families in your child care setting. Everyone in a caregiving relationship benefits from culturally responsive practices.

What is Culture?

Culture is made up of the concrete items and objects we see, hold, and use including clothing, artwork, food, and dance. These are tangible symbols of a person's culture. Culture is also reflected in how people live out their lives – what they believe and the values they hold dear. In many cases a person can be or belong to several cultural groups – some inherited, some learned. In reality, culture is influenced by all aspects of child rearing.

Values and Beliefs

Values are what one holds to be important. Beliefs are what one accepts to be true. Values and beliefs are what parents transmit to their children throughout their lives. These are taught by example and sometimes supported by explanations from home or from others in their own cultural group. Our earliest teachings can affect how we interact with others throughout our lifetime. If we have not had an opportunity to identify the values and beliefs we were taught as children, we may not understand our adult reactions to particular sets of circumstances. As caregivers and teachers of young children, it is essential that we explore our own value and belief systems so that we can make informed, rational decisions about our child care philosophy and practices. This is our professional responsibility.

Cultural Influences in Childrearing Practices

Culture influences how a parent responds to all ages and stages of childrearing such as:

- Age-related expectations of children
- Interest in and concern over children acquiring skills by a certain age
- Sleep patterns and bedtime routines
- Children's roles and responsibilities in the family
- Toilet training
- Diet and mealtime behaviour
- Discipline and child guidance methods

- How parents talk to children
- How parents show affection
- Importance of gender identity
- Dress and hair care
- Illness and use of medicine or folk cures and remedies
- Use of supplementary child care
- Acceptance, meaning of and response to crying
- Child's attachment to adults, separation from adults

Child Rearing Practices

What do we mean by 'child rearing practices'?

Simply put, child rearing practices refer to the way parents raise their children. Some parents repeat the child-rearing patterns that their own parents followed. Others adopt practices that are very different from those of their parents. The child-rearing practices of most parents are a combination of past experiences and new knowledge.

The child-rearing practices parents use are affected by their own family's current individual culture, the ethnic and cultural expectations of their own culture, and the influences of the environment in which they currently live.

Families pass their culture on to their children by socializing them to become active members in a particular culture. Young children understand 'culture' as how things are done at home. Culture affects every aspect of a family's child rearing practices and experiences.

Cultural customs or traditions like music, food and clothing or how people live make up only 10% of cultural identity. These are things about a culture that are visible, and are easily learned by an outsider.

Cultural values and beliefs run deep. These are much more difficult to uncover and represent the foundation of a particular culture. This is the 90% that is invisible.

It is easy to come to recognize and understand those aspects of culture that we can see – 10%. However, when we come to appreciate that the foundations of a culture is the 90% that is invisible to us, we reach a place where we can work together with families to build trusting relationships.

Fundamentals of Cultural Competence

To be an effective child care provider, it is essential to honour the racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, socio-economic and structural diversity of all families. Caregivers can do this by:

- Recognizing the power and influence of culture in shaping values, beliefs and experiences.

- Acknowledging and understanding one's own cultural values, beliefs and behaviours, and how one responds to individuals whose values and beliefs differ from one's own.
- Learning about the cultural norms of communities with which one engages, and about the extent to which individual families share these norms.
- Recognizing the scars that many families carry from past personal and community experiences, and understanding that these experiences may present barriers to positive relationships.
- Approaching each family on its own terms, with no judgments or preconceptions, and enabling each family to define its own needs.
- Helping families learn about the mainstream service delivery system, so that they are able to use the system to meet their needs.
- Eliminating institutional policies and practices that, deliberately or inadvertently exclude families because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, beliefs or practices.
- Building on the strengths and resources of each child, family, community and neighbourhood.

Working with Parents in a Culturally Sensitive Manner

There are guidelines to help caregivers respond in a culturally sensitive manner to families. It takes time and effort but the rewards are worth it.

1. Become clear about your own values and goals.
 - Know what you believe in.
 - Have a bottom line, but leave room to be flexible.
2. Become sensitive to your own discomforts.
 - Work to identify specific behaviours that make you uncomfortable and try to discover what in yourself creates this discomfort. Understanding your reaction to specific triggers is the first step to acceptance of others.
3. Build relationships with families.
 - Building relationships takes time, but it enhances communication and understanding.
 - Good relationships increase the chance for positive conflict resolution.
4. Encourage parents to tell you what they want for their child.
 - Find out parents' goals and concerns.
5. Learn how to create dialogue.
 - Learn ways to show others that you are sensitive to their feelings.
 - Keep trying to see the other point of view while respectfully expressing your own.

6. Use a problem-solving approach rather than power to solve differences.
 - Look at your willingness to share power. Sometimes a problem with others is a control issue.
 - Be flexible and negotiable whenever possible.
7. Commit yourself to learning.
 - Be curious, not furious.
 - Sometimes lack of information or understanding of each other's perspective is what keeps conflict going. Take every opportunity to learn more and share learning.

Routines – A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Be sensitive to cultural differences in your caregiving practices. Put yourself in the child's place!

Arrival and Departure

- Learn how to say 'hello' and 'goodbye' in the children's home languages. Ask parents to teach you!
- At the child's cubby, place a photo of the child with his/her English name along with the child's name in his/her home language.
- Prepare a letter of welcome and orientation to your program and have it translated.
- Make sure you know if an extended family member will pick up the child.

Dressing and Undressing

- In some families, children are dressed and undressed by an older family member.
- Go slowly as you encourage children to learn self-help skills.

Outdoor Play

- Be aware and respectful of varying comfort levels for both children and their parents with messy/dirty play.
- Respect where the child is at. He/she may be unfamiliar with climbing equipment, structures and other large outside equipment.
- Protect the child's right to solitary play.
- Make sure there is an opportunity for play with natural materials – visit parks, beaches, forest areas.

Nap

- Consider what the child is familiar with at sleep time. Is the child used to sleeping alone, with siblings, parents, grandparents?
- Learn comforting, soothing terms in the children's home language.
- Allow children to bring comfort objects from home.
- Learn songs or play gentle music from children's home cultures.

Clean-Up

- Recognize that home expectations of the child's involvement in cleaning up vary widely. Start slowly, and break down large tasks into smaller component parts.
- Reinforce improvement rather than setting absolute standards.
- Be aware that some cultures have different expectations of boys and girls. Be prepared to explain your policy in a clear and respectful manner.

- Help children understand that we may do things differently at day care than how they might do it at home. For example: 'At day care, we all help each other put toys away.'

Washroom

- Recognize that there may be unfamiliarity with toilets, urinals and sinks.
- Respect the right to privacy if the child desires it.
- Be aware of cultural differences regarding methods and expectations for toilet training. Some people use only their left hand when using toilet paper.
- Washing dolls and other toys can help familiarize children with terms like 'hot', 'cold', 'soap', 'washcloth', 'toothbrush', etc.

Snack/Lunch

Become familiar with varying cultural norms. For example:

- Some people are accustomed to eating while seated on the floor.
- Some people eat with their hands and fingers from a communal bowl.
- Some people eat only with their right hand.
- Some children may be fed by an older family member.
- Ask parents about food preferences or needs. Be aware that there are cultural differences regarding foods that are considered 'healthy'. For example, many Asian people believe that raw vegetables are unhealthy for their children.
- Show interest in ethnic foods that children bring. Focus on comparison, not on exoticism. For example, 'That looks delicious. It reminds me of...'
- Introduce new foods slowly.

10 Tips for Working with Multicultural Families

Julie Dotsch, Ontario Welcome House

1. Parents from other cultures have developed their own methods of parenting. Respect those methods. Don't insist that the parents do it your way if they are to be good parents. Don't assume that as a teacher you know what is best for the child and can tell the parent what to do.
2. Establish a good relationship with the parent before giving advice. Take time for general conversation before getting to the point. Directness, in many cultures, is considered rude. Relate to adults as people, not just as parents.
3. Be flexible. Rules may need to be bent or changed to meet parents' needs.
4. Be cautious. Don't intrude too quickly into parents' privacy – it may embarrass them. Taboo subjects – what is considered private – vary greatly from culture to culture.
5. Communicate frequently with parents, not just when there is a problem or for a formal progress report on the child.
6. When speaking with a person who has little English:
 - Speak softly – if you speak too loudly it may sound like yelling to some people.
 - Watch your tone – don't be patronizing.
 - Use simple, clear language.
 - Match your animation level to the parent or child.

- Talk briefly and frequently to the parent – avoid being overly talkative if they have significant difficulty understanding English.
7. Spend time with all new families, and especially new immigrant families.
 8. Seek privacy before discussing confidential or emotional issues.
 9. Study the cultures of the children in your centre. If you have an awareness and understanding of family life, cultural background and individual values of your families, you will transmit that understanding through your behaviour.
 10. Respect, accept, empathize and have patience with ideas that differ from your own.

Celebrations

It is natural and appropriate for child care programs to acknowledge celebrations. It is essential that in doing so, we keep the following in mind:

Careful Planning

1. Caregivers must strive to separate their personal holiday needs from the needs of the children in the program.
2. It is important that caregivers learn all they can about holidays families celebrate and how they celebrate them. Family involvement in planning and implementing holiday activities is helpful. Some families don't celebrate certain holidays or any at all. There must be accommodations made if this occurs.
3. Holidays have no lasting meaning for children if they are the only expression of multicultural education in a child care setting. Quality care includes a multicultural aspect in music, games, stories, pictures and toys every day.
4. As in all program planning, holiday-related activities must be goal-directed and appropriate to children's interests and developmental skills and abilities.

Inclusive Environment

- The holidays of all children in the child care setting need to be reflected equally.
- Meaningful learning occurs when children are involved in creating decorations or displays.
- It is best not to overwhelm the room with holiday-related items.
- Even though it is a time of celebrating, it is important to maintain regular routines and activities.

Cultural Expectations of Developmental Milestones

Expectations of developmental behaviours are culturally bound. What is considered appropriate behaviour in one culture may not be considered appropriate in another. For example, in some

cultures, 3 and 4 year old children are spoon-fed. In others, it is expected that a 3 year old child will use a spoon independently. In some cultures, children are taught not to look directly into a teacher's eyes as a sign of respect. In other cultures, respect is shown by direct eye contact. In some cultures, children are taught not to question an adult's instruction while in another, children may be free to ask why or why not. Even within the same culture, there are sometimes generational differences that can create anxiety or conflict for parents and care providers.

When working with children, our observations, interactions, decisions and behaviours emerge from our own personal value systems. It is important to understand that as individuals we must first come to terms with our own identities before attempting to understand others.

"In an effort to avoid personal and cultural value judgments, teachers can redirect their thinking to the intimate relationship that exists between culture and upbringing. This focus will help teachers to acknowledge and respect differences rather than compare and evaluate them. Ultimately, the guiding principle is to provide coping skills which help the child to be comfortable and successful in two or more cultures" (Chud,G., Fahlman, R. 1985, Early Childhood Education for a Multicultural Society).

More information:

Early Childhood education for a multicultural society

Gyda Chud, Ruth Fahlman; Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press, 1985

Human development, a life span approach, 2nd ed.

John P. Dworetzky: St. Paul, MN: West,1995

Childhood, a multicultural view

Melvin Konner; Toronto, ON: Little, Brown, 1991

A national survey of parents of young children

Lynn Oldershaw; Toronto, ON: Invest in Kids, 2002

The family dynamic, a Canadian perspective

Margaret Ward; Scarborough, ON: Nelson Canada, 1993

Video: Ten keys to culturally sensitive child care

Sacramento, CA: Department of Education,1993

(also available in Chinese and Spanish)

These and other resources are available through the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Library. Call 604-709-5661, toll free 1-877-262-0022 or visit our website at www.wstcoast.org .

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