

Cultural Implications and Considerations for Early Childhood Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education Professionals

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Families from diverse cultures are different in many ways from families in the majority culture, but there are more ways in which they are the same. One of the ways that all families are the same is that family members care about their children and want to play a role in their lives.

For professionals who work with families, it is almost impossible to separate the human factor from the cultural factor. Considering the implications of ethnic and cultural diversity is more of an art than a science. “The purpose of recognizing culture and cultural dynamics is not to predict or anticipate. It is, rather, to become open and respectful to diverse behaviors even when these are outside of our areas of familiarity.” (Barrera, 2000)

The following *Cultural Considerations* are offered with the hope that they may help early childhood providers to better understand diversity and to develop more effective ways to serve multicultural families of young children with disabilities.

Principal I: Identifying Needs Cultural Considerations

Families may more readily share information if professionals use the following strategies:

- Use a conversational style, rather than an inquiry approach. Let the family take the lead in offering information. Ask related follow-up questions to the information they volunteer.
- Do not make assumptions about the intention of non-verbal communication. Nonverbal communication varies greatly by culture. To respond appropriately to nonverbal communication such as eye contact and hesitation time, you will first need to observe what is typical to interaction and communication within the family and between the family and other professionals.
- Be aware that privacy and confidentiality are major issues for all families, and may be especially important to families from diverse cultures. If a family feels they must exchange privacy for services, they may reluctantly decline services. Families will only share information to the extent they feel safe in doing so.

- Model information sharing. Begin by telling the family a little bit about yourself to establish rapport and to set the stage for sharing personal information. Parents will want to know:
 - Your professional role, explained in simple, family-friendly language
 - Your level of experience
 - Your educational background and training
 - Why you are working in this field, and your enthusiasm for your work with young children and families.

- Transition to the exchange of information by explaining what will happen next:

“I’ve told you about myself, and now I am going to ask you some questions to learn more about your child. I will need to write down your answers. When we are done, I will give you a copy of what I have written. You can check it to be sure it is correct. This information will be used to develop a plan to help your child and family. You need to know that I cannot share this information with anyone outside of this program unless you give me your written permission. For instance, if you want me to share information with your doctor, you would need to give me signed permission before I could do so. Do you have any questions about what I’ve told you so far?”

The following selected *DEC Recommended Family-Based Practices and Examples* are especially important when working with families from diverse cultures. Keep in mind that the real challenge is finding a way to share all information in a way the family understands.

- Family members and professionals jointly develop appropriate family-identified outcomes.
 - Information is shared by both professionals and families prior to the ISFP/IEP meeting so that everyone has time to reflect and develop clarifying questions for the meeting.
 - Professionals and family members communicate about priorities, needs, and concerns prior to the formal IFSP/IEP meeting.
- Family members and professionals work together and share information routinely and collaboratively to achieve family-identified concerns.
- Professionals fully and appropriately provide relevant information so parents can make informed choices and decisions.
 - Professionals share information about parents’ rights in the format (e.g., written, video, conversation) and language with which the parents are most comfortable.
 - Professionals provide information such as assessment options; program alternatives; and agency, district, or state policies, etc. so that parents can make informed choices based on complete knowledge.

- The family and professional's relationship building is accomplished in ways that are responsive to cultural, language, and other family characteristics.
 - Professionals identify and use interpreters as necessary to ensure that families have full information about available resources.
 - Professionals attempt to learn at least some words and phrases in the family's preferred language.
 - Professionals encourage family members to include the people they would like to participate in meetings and other activities.
 - Professionals honor each family's decision-making style.

Principal II: Recognizing Family Strengths Cultural Considerations

In recognizing family strengths in families from diverse cultures, begin by identifying and building on the cultural strengths of the family. Help parents identify what they do well by finding out how the family and child participate in the community and its cultural events. Areas worth exploring include identifying what parents:

- *Celebrate as cultural events in their community*
- *Do for fun with their family*
- *Do that makes the child happy*
- *Admire most about their family*
- *Have as goals for the child*
- *Expect of their child at home*
- *Expect of their child in the community*
- *See as their child's big accomplishments*

Cultural Caution: Family strengths may only be fully and accurately assessed by the family. Only the family itself knows how the family functions when no one is observing. Caution should be taken in arriving at conclusions regarding family strengths and “healthy characteristics” on the basis of limited observation, especially when the culture of the family is very different from the culture of the observer.

Cultural Considerations on “The Twelve Characteristics of Healthy Families”:

- Rather than “a sense of purpose” (#4), some families may express having a commitment to each other and the family unit.
- Because communication and interaction styles vary by culture, and cultural roles influence communication, what is viewed as a “positive interaction” (#6) in one culture may not be viewed as positive in another.
- Values, beliefs, and expectations of acceptable and desired behavior (#7) may be clear within the family's own culture, but they may be very different from what is acceptable or desirable in your own culture.
- Solving problems together (#8) may include extended family and non-family community members in some families. In other families, particular individuals may have more of a problem-solving authority role than other family members.
- Coping strategies (#10) in some families will look very different from the coping strategies we may be familiar with in our own family and community. In some cultures, denial may be a more accepted and strongly ingrained response to disability, especially in children who are not yet school age.

- Cultural perspectives on disability may have a significant impact on an individual family's ability to remain positive (#10). In some cultures it is more difficult to accept uncertainty, creating a need for an "answer" of some kind. In other cultures, "shame" may not be compatible with a "positive outlook." When disability is seen as an illness, there may be a corresponding belief that it can be "cured."
- Culturally prescribed family roles and the structure of the family may not provide for flexibility in adopting new roles (#11). As a result, there may be less flexibility in the sharing of responsibilities than what the professionals are familiar with in their own cultures.
- Diverse families may have less of a balance of internal and external resources (#12). At least initially, they may value and focus more on internal resources. Many families will have concerns about sharing personal and private information with public systems. There may be a lack of trust based on past experiences when information may have been misunderstood or used in a way that did not benefit the family.

Principal III: Identifying Sources of Support and Resources

Cultural Considerations

An eco-mapping process is presented as a tool to help the family to determine sources of support and resources. There are several important cultural factors that need to be taken into consideration if utilizing this method with families from diverse cultures.

- A relationship characterized by open communication and trust should be established prior to using the eco-mapping process with a family.
- The Eco-Map picture included in the curriculum suggests that families identify whether a particular relationship is strong, weak, tense, or stressful. Because abstract words and concepts (e.g., “eco-map” and “tense”) are often difficult to translate and understand, it is important to use simple and direct language as much as possible. Rather than asking families to indicate the quality of the relationship, it may be less intrusive and more beneficial to ask the family to identify:
 - *People I can count on to help*
 - *People I cannot count on to help*
 - *People who might possibly be able to help in some way*
- In collectivistic cultures, the family as a unit is more important than the individual members. Family loyalty may be especially strong. Members may not wish to say anything negative about another family member, and may resent questions regarding “stressful relationships.”
- Families may be reluctant to share information about other family members due to concerns regarding immigration status. Legal status may also be a factor in whether or not a family is willing to ask for help or to receive assistance that may be offered.
- Families may not see a clear or compelling reason to give an outsider personal information about their family. Families often feel, “If you are going to ask me for information, I need to know why you want to know and what you will do with the information.”
- There may be a lack of trust based on past experience. For example, county child protection services may have been notified in response to a misunderstanding about the use of herbal remedies. What you view as bringing resources, the family may see as an invasion of privacy. Privacy may be more important to the family than services or supports. The family needs to feel confident that they are in control of the release of any private information.

Principal IV: The Early Childhood Professional's Role The View of the Early Childhood Professional in Diverse Cultures

Early childhood professionals carry out responsibilities in a variety of capacities. It is important to clearly communicate your role to families at the very outset of your interaction.

When explaining what you do, use simple language. Words such as advocate, consultant, mediator and enabler are difficult to translate in a way that makes sense to families from diverse cultures. Words like helper, supporter, and teacher are more universally understood.

Many parents from diverse cultures indicate the most important role is that of teacher and consultant. Professionals are viewed as individuals having the education and expertise to provide answers and solutions. While parents know their own child best, they want and expect the professional to know more than they do about child development, disability, and resources.

Although family members and other informal support individuals contribute their knowledge and experience, those who have received special training and who are being paid to provide services have more clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

The following roles have special importance to families:

Teacher:

Families need help in understanding child development, especially as it relates to the impact of disability on their child's development. Families need to see the professional model effective techniques and demonstrate helpful ways to interact with the child during daily routines and activities.

In cultures in which families typically have several children, parents may be offended by comments that appear to question their parenting skills. It may be helpful to focus on the parenting skills that are unique to parenting the child with a disability.

Resource person:

Families need information about community-based resources. To access services and supports they need a specific individual's name, location and phone number, as well as clear directions on how and when to contact them. It is helpful to explain the possible benefits to a family in connecting with a particular resource. If you expect the family to follow through, it is important to make the process as uncomplicated as possible. Language and cultural challenges may make accessing services very difficult, initially requiring more direct assistance from you, such as making a phone call or going to an intake meeting together.

Many families report that it is not helpful and seems inappropriate to be asked, “What do you and your child need?” before being provided information and examples of available services and supports.

It is important to ask parents first if they want to be connected with a particular resource, since they may not want other people to know about their situation. For example, some families receiving county services do not want other members of their family or community to know they are receiving assistance.

Collaborator:

Families need services to be coordinated in a meaningful way, which requires professionals to communicate and collaborate effectively with one another. This is particularly important when the service provider will be working with an interpreter or cultural mediator or guide.

An understanding presence:

Even when you may not understand the cultural implications of a situation, maintain an understanding presence. Your verbal and nonverbal language needs to convey that you empathize, even when you may disagree. For example, even if the parent complains about your colleagues, you do not become defensive, but rather convey that you are doing your best to understand what the parent is trying to communicate. It is also important to recognize when a family may need the help or support of a neutral person outside of the system delivering services, and know where and how to refer the family.

Conveyor of possibilities and hope:

Immigrant families may come from countries where health care was inadequate and technology nonexistent. Because many children with disabilities died during childbirth or early in life, families may not have seen older children and adults with disabilities participating in the community. Families need help to see the possibilities for individuals they did not have the opportunity to see attending school or community activities in their country of origin.

Potential Pitfalls to Avoid

- **The myth of color blindness.** *Race matters, and efforts to ignore it place unnecessary burdens on developing relationships. Recognizing and honoring cultural and racial variations is a key aspect of cultural competence.*
- **Cultural generalization.** *Generalizing about a culture creates preconceived ideas about the culture that can interfere with understanding the beliefs and practices of each child with a disability and the family.*
- **Devaluing spirituality and family belief systems.** *Spirituality is a foundational support for many diverse populations. Unintended statements that devalue spirituality or other pivotal beliefs create alienation. Families at times have found themselves caught in child protective services for treating their child with a disability through spiritual rather than medical practices. It is important to respect the right of parents to make decisions for their child.*
- **Taking it personally.** *The caution of families may be culturally based, but it may also be the result of reality-based experiences. Even a strong relationship with parents may not override ethnically or racially-based humiliations from the past. Caution is not rejection, and it is best not to take it personally.*
- **Failing to identify and work with the person who makes decisions in the family.** *In many diverse groups, the family crosses over generations and includes more than nuclear family members or even blood relatives. Identifying and working with the leader in family decision making is crucial to building support for our early intervention services.*
- **Not encouraging parents to tell us when they are dissatisfied with our services.** *Some parents will not tell us when our services are not meeting the needs of their child and family. Unless we are able to recognize when the parent is becoming distant and are able to raise the subject, parents may simply go away and not participate in any further services.*

Outcomes of Cultural Competence in Early Childhood Intervention

In the end, if we do not understand and respect the culture of the families we work with, our services and supports may not fit the family's unique needs and thus may not be utilized. It can be puzzling when someone does not respond positively to services we believe will benefit their child, or if their acceptance is low. If we think about culture as difference—legitimate, important difference that we may not have considered—it can help us to reframe our perspective on what families need. Competence occurs when we learn about the individual family culture, appreciate those differences, and incorporate them into our approach. When professionals and parents are able to work effectively together in partnership, we greatly increase the likelihood that all families will know their rights, be able to effectively communicate their child's needs, and help their children develop and learn.

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