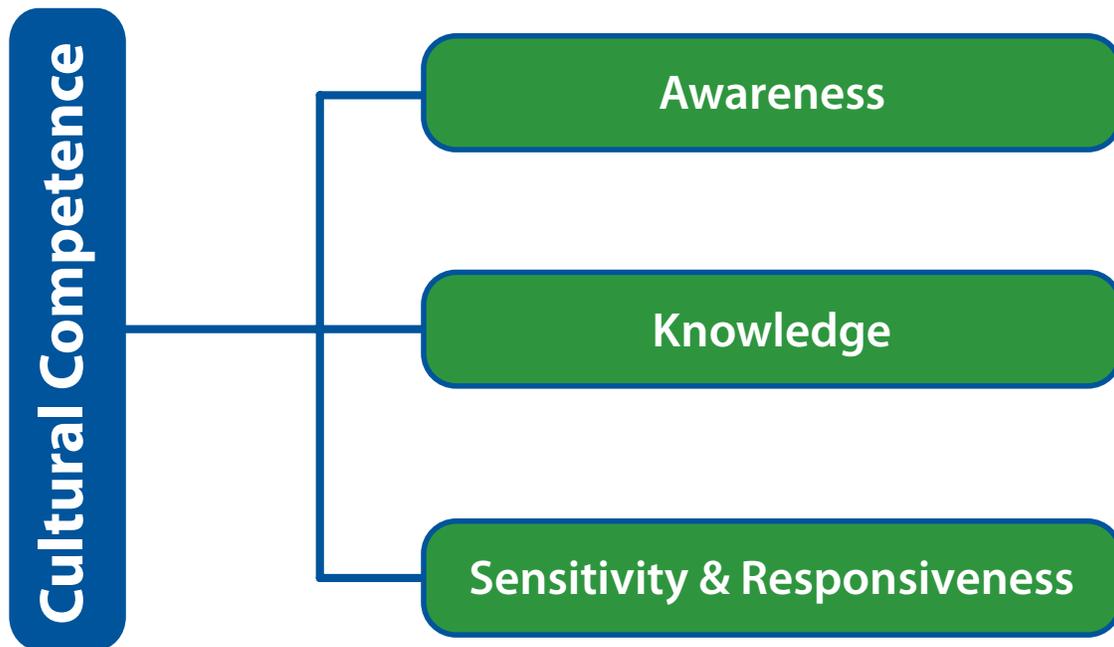


Understanding cultural competence: Untangling meanings

Building a strong base for cultural understanding means untangling meanings, ideas, and practices associated with cultural competence. Cultural competence is referred to as “the ability to understand diverse perspectives and appropriately interact with members of other cultures in a variety of situations.” (Colombo 2005.)

Cultural competence develops by taking a deeper look at cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.



Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness can be described as being aware and observant of other cultural groups as well as being aware of one’s own culture. The National Center for Cultural Competence describes cultural awareness as “being cognizant, observant and conscious of similarities and differences among cultural groups.”(National Center for Cultural Competence)

Cultural awareness requires a great deal of reflection. The cultural self-awareness and knowledge that an educator brings to the classroom will affect how that educator interacts with and helps children learn.

Cultural awareness also requires thinking about prejudice, “an attitude, opinion, or feeling formed without adequate prior knowledge, thought, or reason.” (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000) At one point or another, everyone has learned misconceptions or misinformation about others. Reflecting on one’s own prejudice and biases can help a person develop a better understanding of self. Understanding one’s own prejudice and biases can lead to broader cultural awareness and to developing multiple perspectives when thinking about culture and diversity.

Cultural knowledge

Building cultural knowledge means developing an understanding of culture and cultural groups. Understanding how to support all children and families across cultures means finding out how to relate to children and families whose linguistic and cultural background is different from one's own.

Because children are emotionally and cognitively connected to the culture of their home, best practice supports respecting and building on children's strengths based on their culture.

Becoming knowledgeable about children's individual cultural backgrounds helps educators apply appropriate instruction and supportive curriculum.



Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness

Building cultural sensitivity and responsiveness means knowing that there are differences between cultures and that no one culture is better or worse than another culture. A culturally sensitive educator helps children make connections to learning and interacting with others based on what is familiar and what makes sense to the child, such as incorporating the child's home language into the learning environment. By doing so, the educator demonstrates sensitivity and understanding of culture's important role. A child's sense of self and learning is strengthened by adults who are culturally sensitive and responsive.

"Even when one is being supersensitive to all the problems in understanding cultural differences ... the job is still hard because cultures are constantly changing—especially as they come in contact with other cultures ... So what can you do when faced with all this confusion about labels and culture? ... Look at people as people. No matter what culture a person comes from, a goal should be to develop a person-to-person relationship. Treating people with respect solves many cross-cultural problems." (Mena 2001)

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