

Cultural Understanding

A child's first place of learning is home – it's the place where children find meaning and develop a sense of self - who they are including their family cultural imprint. When we intentionally plan to learn more about each child and family, we begin the journey of understanding and appreciating the whole child; how they learn, what they know, what is trusted, and what will help them succeed. Each child and family in our program has their own unique culture for us to become familiar with.

If you were to describe culture to someone what would you say? The book *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, shares the idea of culture as such: "... culture refers to how particular groups of people live. It is the way we eat, sleep, talk, play, care for the sick, relate to one another, think about work, arrange our kitchens, and remember our dead. It includes the language we speak, the religion or spirituality we practice (or do not), and the clothing, housing, food, and rituals/holidays with which we feel most comfortable."



Untangling Meanings

By untangling meanings, [preservice and inservice] teachers are able to come to the understanding that we all have culture and that culture plays a central role in our beliefs, biases, assumptions, and in the decisions we make when teaching children and working with their families.

– Eva K. Thorp and Sylvia Y. Sanchez

Caring for children from backgrounds other than our own, including cultural, linguistic, racial, religious, physical ability, and class/socio/economic, can make many feel uncomfortable and unprepared. As diverse classroom environments grow, there is critical need in the early childhood community for cultural competence, "the ability to understand diverse perspectives and appropriately interact with members of other cultures in a variety of situations" (Colombo, Michaela w. Reflections from Teachers of Culturally Diverse Backgrounds. 2005).

Cultural competence requires continual learning and reflecting. Understanding culture and diversity does not come in a singular curriculum, class, or even degree (although these help!), but comes from multiple experiences that embrace research and real life.

Cultural competence requires actual interactions with others who come from different backgrounds than our own. Equally important is self-reflection - helping us to look at our feelings, ideas, and beliefs and how those may impact our work (with children and families) in upholding cultural competence.

"I have a child in my class who brings their entire family with them to our 'parent invite' times. It's really important to them that the grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. are there. That's different from what I expected, in fact, some co-workers told me I should say only the parents can come, but I saw that this is important to this family. And, from meeting all the extended family I have gained even more insights – I hear the languages spoken, see how they interact, discover things they think are important, and how they guide the child. It's truly a gift. And they have invited me into their homes and community."

– Wendy, elementary teacher

Culturally responsive, another term used in understanding diversity and culture, recognizes and utilizes the students' culture and language in three dimensions: Instructional (methods, activities, materials), Personal (knowledge, self-reflection, relationships), and Institutional (school/program, policies, community). Being culturally responsive respects the students personal and community identities and supports the idea that no group is better or more competent than the other. It is our ethical responsibility to be fair and advocate equality for all children.

Social Awareness, another term often used in cultural development, is "the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with someone else and to appreciate and respect diversity." (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), School-Family Partnership Strategies to Enhance Children's Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth).

References:

Richards, Heraldo V., Ayanna F. Brown, and Timothy Forde, Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. The National Center For Culturally Responsive Educational Systems. 2006.

Thorp, Eva K., and Sylvia Y. Sanchez, Why Address Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Preservice and Inservice Preparation?

Colombo, Michaela W. Empathy and Cultural Competence, Reflections from Teachers of Culturally Diverse Children. 2005.



Finding cultural understanding

Spend time with families in and outside of the program.

Building relationships helps us learn about each other and remove any misconceptions. If possible, try scheduling a home visit with each family. Plan ways families can participate in the program.

Reflect on the tangible and intangible aspects of culture.

Many first thoughts of culture are tangible elements, such as food, dress, and art. Intangible elements are things like values, practices, and beliefs. Both tangible and intangible aspects of culture are important to think about.

Keep learning. Find professional and informal opportunities to continue learning about culture and diversity.

NAEYC (The National Association for the Education of Young Children) has a listing of Resources on Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Settings. <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200511/DiversityResourcesBTJ1105.pdf>.

The National Center for Children in Poverty offers an extensive annotated bibliography for Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity in Early Childhood, Toward a Research and Practice Agenda http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_810.pdf.

Daniel, Jerlean and Susan Friedman. Taking the Next Step: Preparing Teachers to Work with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children. November 2005.

Romero, Mariajose, PhD. Promoting Tolerance And Respect for Diversity in Early Childhood, A view from the field. May 2008.

Gonzalez-Mena, Janet and Anne Stonehouse. Making Links: A Collaboration Approach to Planning and Practice in Early Childhood Programs. 2008.