

Culture Matters — Strategies to Support Young Children’s Social and Cultural Development

Tonia R. Durden, Early Childhood Extension Specialist
 Elsa Escalante and Kimberly Blitch, Extension Graduate Assistants

How particular groups of people live is called culture. Learning more about cultural diversity can expand an appreciation and enjoyment of others. This publication describes ways that early childhood professionals can help support young children’s social and cultural development.

WHAT?

What is Culture?

Culture refers to how particular groups of people live. In the broadest sense, culture is the “items,” “customs,” and “values” we use to express ourselves and engage in the world around us. We **ALL** have a culture!

Cultural examples or tangibles include how we express our diverse cultural backgrounds in clothing, jewelry, food, furniture, art, music, dance, language, and games, for example.

Customs include celebrations, holidays, marriage, how people communicate, age of adulthood, recreation, roles of individuals within a family, childcare, and how people show affection.

Values are our beliefs or the reasons for our actions. Examples of what a person may value could include their role in the world, role of children, role of the environment, attitude toward time, attitude toward money, definition of achievement, or an understanding of the world in which we live.

The ways in which we are culturally diverse include ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, family structure, age, and disability.

**Unless otherwise cited, the information presented in this publication is based on the results of multisite research studies focusing on supporting children’s social and cultural awareness in early childhood education. This publication is a companion piece to G2242 for parents.

Everyone has a culture, and sometimes this culture may be invisible to us. However, as early childhood professionals it’s important to understand the culture that children bring to the classroom and how our own culture impacts how we interact with and teach young children.



Children’s first and most important teachers are their parents.

Therefore from the early beginnings of a child’s life, they are experiencing and learning about their culture. Cultural aspects unique to young children’s homes includes the language they speak (**Ni Hao!/Hello!**); interactions with their primary caregiver (**Love you Nana!/Big hug Uncle!**); or even their mealtime routines (**Yummy pizza/ Oh yes, Soul Food Sunday dinner!**). When we get to know cultural practices in the home, we can use this knowledge to create activities and experiences that are meaningful and connected to children’s lives.

SO WHAT?

Why does culture matter in early childhood education?

Culturally Responsive Teaching draws upon the cultural knowledge, skills and talents that young children bring with them from home (Gonzalez-Mena, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2014). When we teach children based on their uniqueness and where they come from, WE as early childhood professionals begin to:

- Intentionally encourage **all** children to be contributing members within the classroom community;
- Build young children’s self-confidence and skills;
- Promote the development of inclusive peer groups and friendships (age, gender, special needs); and

- Become more aware of how to distinguish between a cultural and language difference and a learning or behavioral special need.

NOW WHAT?

What can I do to support children’s social and cultural development?

In early childhood educational settings children naturally use their home or cultural knowledge to explore and learn about the world around them. They might use their first language with peers during free play, outside time, and mealtime or may re-enact their home experiences during dramatic play (example: Dad cooks, Mommy rocks me to sleep each night).

As an adult working with young children YOU can do the following to further encourage culturally responsive teaching!

1. **Create culturally responsive activities:** Intentionally promote and encourage cultural diversity with young children by creating a multisensory environment where they can speak, touch, taste, see, and feel their culture and the culture of others. For example, help children “see” culture and encourage early literacy by using mirrors to engage infants and toddlers in baby talk as they explore the physical characteristics and differences among themselves and others. Label objects or areas in the educational environment using multiple languages, including sign language. If only one language is spoken in your classroom or home childcare setting, consider the languages spoken in the larger community. To avoid miscommunicating to children that English is the better language, place languages side by side as illustrated below in this teacher’s work sample labeled for children in both English and Mandarin (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Dragon labeled in English and Mandarin.

Let children and families “hear” and “feel” the presence of cultural awareness and appreciation in your early childhood program or center by posting greetings from around the world in your welcome area. Saying “hello” from around the world is a fun way to greet children and parents! (Figure 2).

- Spanish Hola (oh la)
- Vietnamese Chao chau
- Korean Annyong ha shimnikka
- Swahili Jambo
- Chinese Ni hao (nee-Ha-OW)
- Russian Zdravstvuite (ZzDRAST-vet-yah)
- Japanese Konichiwa (koh-Nee-chee-wah)
- Polish Czesc (Chesht)



Figure 2. Located on the wall within the entryway, teachers at this childcare center demonstrate use of language as a way to promote cultural diversity for preschool children and families.

2. **Learn from families:** Partner with families to better understand their family structure and culture. Set up multiple ways to learn from families such as:
 - **Diverse communication methods:** When asked for suggestions on effective ways to communicate, parents in the study shared their preferences for teachers to just ask them what’s the best way to connect with their family. Parents suggested diverse methods such as texting, phone calls, face-to-face conversations during pick up and drop off, and two-way folders. Two-way folders are a form of written communication designed for parents and teachers to share back and forth what the child is learning both at home and school. The two-way folder can be shared daily or weekly. Two-way folders are a great way for parents and teachers to collaborate to support the learning goals of the child in both settings.
 - **Family nights and home visits:** One way to learn more about the culture and family experiences of children in your program is to have scheduled opportunities throughout the year to bring families together to learn and explore

cultures represented in the program and community. Is there an annual parade, community 5K event, or cultural celebration that occurs in your community? Why not use this as an opportunity to invite families to a night or weekend day out to engage children and families in the larger diversity within the community?

Keep in mind any program policies related to family engagement. Consider visiting the homes of new and returning families at the beginning of the year to learn about children's interests, family activities, customs, and traditions. When visiting families bring pictures and stories of your family life to share. Home visits are a great way to begin and continue a tradition of cultural exchanges between you and the families you serve!

Use your resources: Sometimes it can be overwhelming as a teacher to know where to begin to integrate cultural diversity for young children. Therefore, start first with the resources right in your early care program. This includes YOU! *Figure 3* is an example of how one team of teachers created a learning station highlighting the diverse cultures of the students in the classroom. You could extend your learning station to include cultures beyond your own and the children you serve by brainstorming with children and families about the popular ethnic foods you have in common or cultures of interest.



Figure 3. Classroom learning station highlighting diverse cultures.

- 3. Create a culturally diverse learning environment:** The physical environment should reflect the diversity of the children and families you serve and the larger community. This includes pictures of families in your program, diverse dramatic play items, books (*Figure 4*), toys, and puzzles that are nonstereotypical and represent culturally affirming and accurate depictions of the cultural group.



Figure 4. An example of a classroom library with a diversity of books representing multiple elements of diversity.

As you consider implementing activities and interactions that support young children's learning and development, don't forget culture matters!

As you continue to explore how best to support children's social and cultural development, the following are professional development resources for you to consider.

Professional Development Resources

- Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2010). *50 Strategies for communicating and working with diverse families*. (2nd ed.). Columbus: Pearson.
- Pelo, A. (2008). *Rethinking early childhood education*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd.
- Sparks, L.D. & Edwards, J.O. (2010). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Teaching Tolerance Project (1997). *Starting small: Teaching tolerance in preschool and the early grades*. Montgomery: Southern Poverty Law Center.
- Whitney, T. (1999) *Kids like us: Using persona dolls in the classroom*. Beltsville: Gryphon House.
- York, S. (2005). *Roots and wings: Affirming culture in early childhood programs*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.

Children's Books:

- Whoever You are*, Mem Fox
- I Like Myself*, Karen Beaumont
- What I like About ME!* Allia Zobel Nolan

We're Different, We're The Same, Bobbi Kates and Joe Mathieu

All the Colors of the Earth, Shelia Hamanka

A South African Night, Rachel Isadora

Who's in a Family? Robert Skutch and Laura Nienhaus

*Many of the classic American children's books such as *The Hungry Caterpillar*, *Stella Luna*, and *The Giving Tree*, or fables such as *Cinderella* are published and/or adapted to other languages and cultures.

Websites:

Anti-defamation League:

http://www.adl.org/tools_teachers/tip_antibias_ed.asp

National Association for Bilingual Education:

<http://www.nabe.org>

National Association for Multicultural Education:

<http://www.nameorg.org>

Please visit the UNL Extension Learning Child Team at child.unl.edu for additional resources or how to support children's social and cultural development and information on a range of topics in early childhood education.

Resources:

Durden, T., Escalante, E., & Blich, K. (2014). Start with Us! Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Preschool Classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 1-10; DOI: 10.1007/s10643-014-0651-8.

Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2009). *Child, family and community: Family centered early care and education* (5th ed.). Columbus: Pearson.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84 (1), 74-84.

This publication has been peer reviewed.

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

**Index: Families
Childhood**
Issued September 2014

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2014, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.