

# Culture Matters — Strategies to Support Your Young Child’s Social and Cultural Development

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How particular groups of people live is called culture. Learning more about cultural diversity can help expand an appreciation of others. This publication describes ways that parents can intentionally familiarize their children with cultural diversity at home and support the diversity efforts of their child’s teacher.

## 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, child care, 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 of people in the world, role of children, role of the environment, attitude toward time, attitude toward money, definition of achievement, or 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.

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\*\*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 G2241 for teachers.

Everyone has a culture, and sometimes this culture may be invisible to us. However, children’s first and most important teachers are, **YOU**, their parents. Therefore from the early beginnings of your child’s life they are experiencing and learning about the culture, values, and customs of your family. For example, they listen and begin



to imitate the language used by primary adults in their lives (**Ni Hao!/Hello**); learn to form close bonds with primary caregivers and learn culturally meaningful terms to describe each caregiver (**Love you Nana!/Big Hug Uncle!**); Your child picks up on the family’s mealtime routines and come to also enjoy favorite cultural meals (**Yummy pizza / Oh yes, Sunday Soul Food dinner!**)

When families identify those important cultural practices in the home you want your young child to learn and hold on to, you can use this knowledge to share with teachers so they can create activities and experiences that are meaningful and connected to your child’s life.

## SO WHAT?

### Why does culture matter in early childhood education?

Since we live our culture each day, sometimes our unique familial practices and beliefs become invisible to us and may not be apparent to the teachers who are educating your child. When children leave home to attend preschool or kindergarten, they don’t leave their culture or language at home — they take all of the unique cultural skills, tools, and knowledge you have taught them during the early years of their life. Therefore, a best practice in early childhood education is what’s called culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Responsive Teaching draws upon the cultural knowledge, skills, and talents young children bring with them from home (Gonzalez-Mena, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2014). When children are taught based on who they uniquely are and where they come from, teachers themselves have the tools needed 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 culture and language difference and a learning or behavioral special need.

### NOW WHAT?

#### What can I do to support my child’s social and cultural development?

Young children naturally use their home or cultural knowledge to explore and learn about the world around them. When learning to communicate, toddlers will use all the languages they are learning interchangeably with primary adults and peers. You may have noticed your infant’s curiosity to the differences in sound and physical characteristics of diverse people caring for them. Older toddlers and 3- to 5-year-olds might use their first language with peers during free play, outside time, and mealtime, or may re-enact their home experiences during dramatic play (for example, my Daddy cooks or Mama rocks me to sleep each night).

As a parent of a young child you can do the following to help your child’s teacher implement culturally responsive teaching!

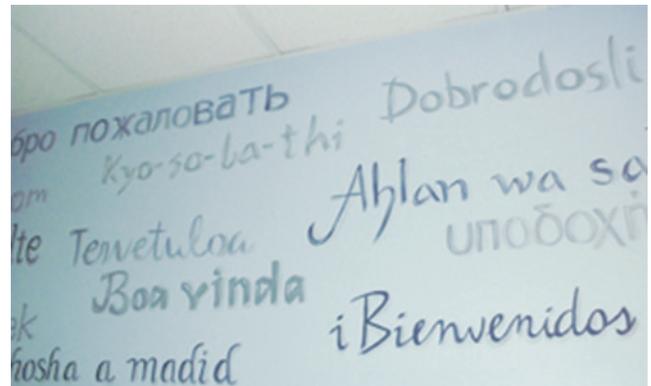
**Share activities you do at home with teachers:** Do you speak another language? Has your family traveled outside of the country? If your teacher knew the different languages and/or cultures your child was exposed to, he or she could develop culturally responsive activities that build upon this knowledge your child would bring to the early childhood program. For example, young children learn best through their senses. Being able to speak, touch, taste, see, and feel their culture and the cultures of others in the home and school helps not only develop a child’s positive sense of self but also increases their awareness of other cultures, too — all actions that support children’s social **and** cultural development.

Teachers can use children’s home culture and experiences by labeling objects around the classroom or educational setting in both English and native language spoken or being learned in the home. Such practice promotes early literacy and bilingual education. Teachers could use items from a recent trip taken abroad in the dramatic play area for your child to play with friends and reenact his or her experience. Are there cultural music, artifacts, or even family photos you could share with your child’s teacher? These tangibles not only spark many learning activities and

discussions but also will help your child feel special and a contributing member of his or her classroom community.

You too can help your child “see,” “touch,” “feel,” and “hear” different cultures in your home. For example you could label objects in your home in different languages, your native language and one your family may be interested in learning together. During pick up time, help your child “hear” cultural diversity by greeting him or her from around the world! You could even share these fun greetings with your child’s teacher (*Figure 1*).

- |              |                                |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| • 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 1.** Located on the wall within the entryway, teachers at this childcare center demonstrate how they use language as a way to promote cultural diversity for their preschool children and families.

**Become a partner with teachers:** Your child now has two important teachers in their lives and therefore it is very important to work together to help your child reach optimal success in both home and school environments. Having open lines of communication between you and your child’s teacher is very important to your child’s overall growth and development. However, teachers are not mind readers and sometimes may have one method of communicating with all parents, especially since it maybe one teacher and more than 30 parents. Therefore, share with your child’s teacher the best way to communicate with you concerning your child’s learning, growth and development.

Do you prefer a phone call? Text or email? Face-to-face chat? Or maybe a two-way notebook is helpful where you and your child’s teacher can write back and forth about your child’s daily progress.

Whatever communication method is best for you, share with the teacher. Also, take advantage of opportunities the teacher provides to learn more about your family life and culture. For example, your child’s teacher may host a family night. Suggest the idea of sharing cultural foods and traditions

at this family night. Some teachers may do home visits. This could be a great time to invite the teacher into your home so she could learn about your child's favorite book, activity to do at bedtime, or activities your family does together. Such links between home and school helps build the continuity of care, security, and learning between these two very important environments for children.

**Be a resource.** Did you know that YOU are a cultural expert? No one has as much knowledge about your family's beliefs, values, culture, and traditions than YOU. Sometimes it can be overwhelming for both teachers and parents to know where to begin in supporting children's social and cultural development. Therefore, start first with the resources right in your home! What are the foods your family likes to eat? Are they food from around the world, or local restaurants? If pizza is your family's favorite meal together, explore with your young child what country is known for its pizza, even introducing a few words from the language (gustosa pasta or tasty pasta).

Create or share a family photo album with your child, discussing your heritage and places around the country or where members of your family are from or have traveled to. Lastly, share the cultural knowledge and experiences with your child's teacher. *Figure 2* shows how one team of teachers used the children's and parents' cultural knowledge to display the rich diversity in the classroom.



**Figure 2.** Classroom learning station highlighting diverse cultures.

**Create a culturally diverse home environment.** Naturally, home environments are rich with our own cultural background and experiences (i.e. photos of family members, traditional food items, music we listen to as a family). Consider ways your home environment can reflect the diversity of the community and country in which you live. For example, try a new recipe from another culture, listen to a different musical genre, or expose your child to books, toys, and puzzles that

are non-stereotypical and represent culturally affirming and accurate depictions of diverse cultural groups.

Remember that culture matters when helping to support your child's early learning and development.

As you continue to explore how best to support your child's social and cultural development the following are children's books and websites for you to consider.

#### **Children 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 children American 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:**

Please visit the UNL Extension Learning Child Team at [child.unl.edu](http://child.unl.edu) for additional resources on 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.

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