

Understanding Culturally Sensitive Care and Education

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How can anyone possibly know everything about every different culture that might show up in children's services? We're educators, teachers, providers, and caregivers, not anthropologists! Even if we were anthropologists, how many cultures could we study, anyway?

What has helped me to understand more about cultural sensitivity is some research by Patricia Greenfield, which looks at diverse meanings of common behaviors that can cause dissention between families and teachers. Greenfield's research contrasts two perspectives - that of the individualist and that of the collectivist.

What's an individualist and what's a collectivist? * Most of us trained in early childhood education can easily see the perspective of an individualist; they are the ones who stress self-help skills by giving babies finger food and spoon feeding them only until they manage it themselves. They say to preschoolers who managed to zip their jacket, "You did it without any help!" They are individualists because they perceive their job as treating each infant and toddler as a unique and special *individual* who is on the way to gaining *independence*.

A collectivist, on the other hand, sees the child first and foremost as a member of the group, not apart and separate. Collectivists perceive their job as firmly attaching the child to the group. To do that they *deemphasize* individuality and independence. They downplay specialness. They are likely to spoon-feed babies much longer than an individualist. They may keep on spoon feeding into the preschool years and even beyond. They are aiming for *interdependence*. They not only feed babies, but put coats on preschoolers – and zip them. They see such acts as solidifying connections.

Individualists start encouraging children to do things on their own at a very young age. They are the ones who wait a bit for little babies to learn to calm themselves before they jump in and soothe them. They teach three year olds problem-solving skills and help them develop "inner controls" so that they don't have to depend on adults so much for guidance.

Collectivists' top priority is strengthening relationships and moving children away from their independent urges. Instead they give the message to children that it's okay to depend on adults. Those children who want to do everything themselves get an even

* Note: Individualism and collectivism are useful labels, but not meant to be used to put people into boxes. The two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Most people incorporate elements of both. Think of a continuum and imagine that any given person or group falls somewhere along it. This article contrasts the extreme ends. Also realize that these two labels don't explain everything about a person or a group. The idea is to expand awareness and understanding, not limit it by categorizing in simplistic ways.

stronger message about the importance of graciously accepting help. When children are old enough to help others, collectivists encourage them to do so. Helping oneself is not considered important enough to teach because it is seen as a natural inclination that needs to be discouraged rather than the opposite.

Individualists recognize achievement and expect even the youngest child to feel good about accomplishments. “Look what a great job you did” says the adult, “And you did it all by yourself!” When the child responds with a show of pride, the adult sees evidence that self-esteem is rising. It’s even better when children point out to the adult how strong, smart, or capable they are. “Look at me!” is encouraged.

Collectivists on the other hand value modesty and humbleness; they downplay expressions of pride in personal achievements. Self-praise is considered bragging and is discouraged. It’s not individual achievement that is valued but rather group achievement.

So imagine what happens when a collectivist’s child ends up in an individualistic program. Most children experience confusion at the very least. To minimize difficulties, adults need to become conscious of how their actions are culturally-based. Awareness of differing perspectives helps adults begin to figure out what to do about them so that children who are grounded in one system and end up in another one do not experience conflicts that interfere with their growth and development. It’s important that professionals honor differences in the families they serve and work together with those families to figure out what is best for the child.

References

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