

FACTS and TIPS

Young Dual Language Learners (Birth through 5 years)



Topic # 3.2 Cultural Considerations

FACT #1: *Child rearing beliefs and practices are strongly influenced by culture* (Barerra & Corso, 2003; Castro, et al, 2011; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). In fact, how children are raised and socialized is one of the most important functions of culture (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Whether consciously or not, families communicate their particular cultural values, beliefs, expectations, and rules in everything they say and do with their children. Cultural beliefs and rules guide families in how, what, where, and with whom they eat, sleep, dress, communicate, work, express or not express feelings, behave within and outside of the family (both within groups and individually), engage or not engage in religious practices, treat elders and children, regard the natural world and animals, and celebrate holidays (Castro, et al, 2011; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). So expectations for what is considered appropriate child behavior as well as disciplinary practices are also highly influenced by cultural beliefs and expectations.

FACT #2: *Many expectations held for child development are currently based on white, Euro-American middle-upper class culture and research.* For example, independence, autonomy and initiative are encouraged at a very early age in the Euro-American dominant culture. Consequently, early childhood programs often encourage, teach, and expect children to eat and dress independently by 3-4 years of age in the United States. They also encourage children to independently create and engage in art projects without waiting for adult direction or explanation. Other cultures may place a higher value on *interdependence*. The value of interdependence may be expressed in some families by breast feeding children well beyond the first year of life, helping to feed and dress children until 5-6 years of age, and teaching children to wait for adult direction before initiating projects on their own (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; York, S. 2003). Euro-American dominant culture also tends to emphasize individual achievement and individual rights over group efforts. In fact, early childhood practitioners often “acknowledge individual children for their efforts and achievement as a motivation technique” although some cultures highly discourage singling out individuals for praise (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 61). It may be more important to serve the group than demonstrate individual skills for children of some cultures which can impact how we evaluate children’s abilities and performance.

FACT #3: *Children learn about the value of their own and others’ social identities through both overt and covert messages.* Children form opinions about the “rightness” or “wrongness” of themselves and others through overt verbal messages they receive from the important adults in their lives. However, children also pick up messages about their social identity by the unspoken messages they receive. If the visual and material early childhood environment or services are not representative of the child’s home culture, 3-4 year olds may begin to internalize that they “don’t belong” or that there is something “wrong” or “strange” about their home culture (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). When children’s home language is not supported and they do not see pictures representative of themselves and their family in books, pictures, or other learning materials they may receive the unspoken message that they are not as important or valued for who they are. “Remember, invisibility erases identity and experience: visibility affirms reality” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 59).



Instructional Tips

- ❖ Pay attention to the absence and presence of messages regarding race, language, and culture of the families in your program. Remember to consistently explore cultural similarities and differences of *all* the children in your care. Use books and family photos to discuss similarities and differences between the way families prepare meals, spend their day, sleep, travel from place to place, etc. Ask children how *their* family makes dinner. Who prepares the meal? How is it the same or different from the family in the story or from another child's family? What do the children do to get ready for bed? How or do they celebrate birthdays? How is that the same or different from other children's experiences?
- ❖ Remember to follow the children's lead and to correct any misinformation they might have about particular ethnic groups, cultures, languages, races, or genders. For example, if a child says "Chang sounds funny when he talks", this is a perfect opportunity to talk about how Chang already knows a different language called Mandarin Chinese. Explain that Chang is just learning English so he may pronounce words differently as he is learning. To further children's understanding of what this means, you might invite Chang's parents to teach all of the children a simple song or rhyme in their home language and later talk about their experience with the new language. Did they have trouble pronouncing and understanding words? How did that sound? How did that make them feel?
- ❖ Remember to keep cultural differences in mind when assessing children's progress and behavior and when using motivational or disciplinary techniques. Know the limitations of the curriculum and assessment tools your program uses so that you can make necessary adjustments to accommodate the different cultural values and beliefs of the children and families in your care. Be careful not to interpret "differences" as deficits or problems.



Connecting with Families

- ❖ Learning about families' child rearing practices is critical for practitioners in order to provide "cultural continuity" between children's home culture and the culture of your program (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2011). Again, learning about family values and preferences (with the use of an interpreter) around eating, sleeping, dressing, expectations for child behavior with adults, peers, and in groups, disciplinary practices, and expectations for learning, etc. can help practitioners understand children's behavior AND help them incorporate their families' values in their practice. Remember that this learning process takes *time and trust*. It won't happen during one or two family visits but over a series of meaningful and open interactions between your program and the family.
- ❖ Be clear with families about the principles and practices of your program and why you do what you do. Ask for parents' feedback on the core values and practices of your program. Openly discuss what your program can and cannot modify and why.
- ❖ Examine how *your* culture affects your teaching and your interactions with families:
 - What beliefs about working with children from your own cultural background are most important to you?"
 - "Which principles and beliefs in early childhood education are most important to you?"
 - "Are there any practices from your home culture that you think could be adapted or rethought? Any from early childhood education?"
 - "Which practices are 'bottom line' for you—that is principle-based practices that you are unwilling to adapt?"
 - "What kind of balance do you have between practices you are willing to adapt and ones you consider 'bottom line'?"

(Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 63)

TOPICS #3.1 and #3.2: Cultural Considerations

References

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