

# CULTURAL COMPETENCY: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

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*A young Guatemalan immigrant mother comes to pick up her 13-month-old daughter at an infant-toddler daycare program, and is distressed to find her child's shoes are in the cubby, instead of on her feet. The last two times this happened, she had explicitly told the teacher she wanted her daughter to wear shoes. As before, the teacher explains that going barefoot is the best thing for a child who is learning to walk, and she doesn't think stiff dressy shoes are appropriate attire for a toddler to wear to the program. The teacher is concerned about balance and physical control. The mother, on the other hand, is concerned about parasites in the soil – a common danger back in rural Guatemala – and how others might view her as ignorant if her child is not wearing shoes. The teacher feels the parent is refusing important information about healthy development; the mother feels the teacher is ignorant about environmental dangers and social stigma.*



*A parenting series is held at a neighborhood school on the role of parents in supporting academic success. At the first session, the trainer emphasizes the importance of creating a separate, undisturbed quiet space for elementary school students to do their homework at night. She tells parents they should take their children to the library once a week, and read books to them in English each night. At the end of the session, each parent is asked to sign a “Parent Contract for Academic Success” attesting to their agreement to create supportive learning conditions at home. Two parents leave before signing the document, and never return. One felt embarrassed, unable to imagine how, in the overcrowded apartment shared by three generations (9 people), a separate homework space could be arranged. Another felt heavy-hearted and ashamed because he never learned to read in his native Vietnamese, and is just beginning to learn English. The trainer is disappointed that attendance is dwindling and feels frustrated that some parents weren't even willing to sign the agreement.*



These two vignettes are examples of the kinds of cultural challenges and misunderstandings common in situations where service providers are working with children and families whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. Sometimes these situations cause discomfort; occasionally they are explosive; sometimes they go unrecognized as anything more than a lack of connection. However they play out, they often result in disappointing outcomes. In diverse communities, cultural differences, clashes, and misunderstandings are powerful forces that shape whether people are able to access services. They also determine to a large extent the degree to which programs are able to be successful and reach their goals.

Program effectiveness in a diverse society requires responsiveness to the dynamics of cultural difference and power. But what does that look like? What does it mean for service providers to be culturally responsive? How can a program or agency operate in ways that are inclusive and equitable for the various cultural and language groups they seek to serve? Part of the answer lies in the development of cultural competency.

## What is Cultural Competency?

Cultural competency is the ability to work effectively across cultures. For individuals, it is an approach to learning, communicating and working respectfully with people different from themselves. Culture can refer to an individual's race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status and age, among other things. For organizations, cultural competency means creating the practices and policies that will make services more accessible to diverse populations, and that provide for appropriate and effective services in cross-cultural situations.

Sometimes the leadership of an organization may feel it has created a culturally competent agency because the staff includes people representing the various cultures being served. Similarly, an individual may feel that he or she is culturally competent as a result of attending trainings on the customs and traditions of a particular cultural group. Both of these are important. But cultural competency includes more. Culturally competent organizations go beyond hiring and professional development to build mechanisms into the daily life of the organization that foster continual learning, and that help in adapting services on an ongoing basis to be more respectful, effective and appropriate to diverse populations.

**“The development of cultural competency may be best thought of not as arriving at a set of skills and knowledge, but rather as a journey and a way of being.”**

Cultural competency is not a destination. The work of bridging cultures and creating responsive services is never “done.” Communities continue to change. Service providers continue to interact with new cultural groups. And as individuals, we continue to discover new layers of our own cultural assumptions. Because of this, the development of cultural competency may be best thought of not as arriving at a set of skills and knowledge, but rather as a journey and a way of being.

## Why is Cultural Competency Important?

In the diverse communities of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, cultural competency has become a necessity for service providers, professionals and agencies. In the midst of an unprecedented demographic shift, there is no longer any single ethnic, racial or cultural group that constitutes a numerical majority. People from every corner of the globe live in these communities, and within the two counties more than 50 languages are spoken. Disproportionately, immigrants and people of color live in the poorest communities, attend the most overcrowded schools with the least trained teachers, and work the least-paid and least health-sustaining jobs. Marginalized groups are struggling with the effects of discrimination. There is great urgency for service and support organizations to reach these groups – and to be able to serve them effectively. To do so in a place as diverse as the Bay Area, every agency leader, staff member and provider needs to reach out to, learn about and connect with children and families who are different from themselves in some way – who don't share their culture, racial experience, language, class background, religion, gender, nationality, and/or other experiences.

As noted in “How Culture Shapes Social-Emotional Development: Implications for Practice in Infant-Family Programs,” by Monimalika Day and Rebecca Parlakian, a lack of cultural understanding or culturally congruent services often cause misunderstandings between families and practitioners, which can lead to conflict or feelings of being judged. The report also states, “For children, unresolved differences between culture at home and in infant-family programs can result in difficulties that affect their social and emotional development.” But programs that work to understand and respond to cultural differences among families have the power to make a strong positive impact. (Zero to Three, 2003) Similarly, in the youth development arena, because of the centrality of identity-related concerns in the middle and high school years, it is essential to engage young people’s cultural and social experiences if we are to meaningfully reach and support them. (“Culture and Context,” Ms. Foundation for Women, 2006.)

Cultural competency is therefore not a luxury, but an important foundation for organizations – making it possible to serve all communities, bridge across differences, and ultimately improve the social, health and educational outcomes of children and youth.

## What is Culture?

Cultural competency begins with understanding “culture.” Culture encompasses all the learned beliefs, traditions, language, values, customs, rituals, manners of interacting, forms of communication, expectations for behaviors, roles and relationships commonly shared among members of a particular group, and often transmitted from generation to generation. It shapes experiences, large and small – the ways parents discipline their children, the structure of family relationships, expectations of what it means to be a boy or a girl, values about health and approaches to healing, body language, what types of things get said and what types go unspoken. All of these define how things are supposed to be for the members of a given culture. They become, for that group, the “norm,” and feel so natural that they often become unconscious and invisible to people within that culture.

There are five important things to understand about culture:

## CULTURAL SNAPSHOT

### SANTA CLARA COUNTY

In Santa Clara County, Whites are the single largest group at 41%, followed by Asians at 30%, Latinos at 25% and African Americans at 3%. One-third of the population in the county is foreign born; and nearly half of the households (45%) speak a language other than English. Among the students in Santa Clara County public schools, 49% (close to 125,000) come from homes where languages other than English are the dominant language – and they represent 56 different language groups.



### SAN MATEO COUNTY

In San Mateo County, Whites are also the largest group at 47%, followed by Asians at 23%, Latinos at 23% and African Americans at 3%. Approximately one-third (32%) are foreign born, and 42% of the households speak a language other than English at home. More than 4 out of 10 K-12 students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken – and they represent among them 51 different languages.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2005; California Department of Education, 2006

■ *Everyone has a culture.* It is core to their identity, behavior and perspectives on the way the world works and should be. In fact, everyone lives as part of multiple cultural spheres: ethnic, religious, class, gender, race, language, and others. Culture is not just the group a person is born into. It is possible to acquire a new culture by moving to a new country or region, for example, or by a change in economic status, or by becoming disabled. (University of Kansas' Community Tool Box, <http://ctb.ku.edu>.)

■ *There is diversity within cultures.* While two people may both be Latinos with parents from Mexico, for instance, a religious Catholic daughter of professionals who lived in Mexico City will have very different cultural norms and perspectives from the son of an indigenous farmer who spent early years in a very poor rural area.

■ *Cultures are not static.* They grow and evolve in response to new circumstances, challenges and opportunities. The ways of being female learned by young girls in South Asian culture, for example, have changed from one generation to another, and as people have moved from place to place.

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■ *Culture is not determinative.* Different people take on and respond to the same cultural expectations in different ways. Assumptions therefore cannot be made about individuals based on a specific aspect of their cultural experience and identity.

■ *Cultural “differences” are complicated by differences in status and power between cultures.* When one cultural group has more power and status, the norms of that culture permeate the institutions of society as the “right” way. Cultures of less status and power become seen as “other,” or even deviant and deficient. In addition to understanding cultural norms and experiences, service providers and professionals in agencies that work with diverse populations need to be aware of these kinds of cultural biases, both as they play out in the lives of communities, and as they affect the practices and policies of organizations.

## What Does Cultural Competency Look Like?

*Sara Watkins, a visiting RN, enters the home of a Laotian family, anxious to help the parents address the needs of their 3-year-old who has recently been released from the hospital after a bout with asthma. The nurse notices round abrasions on the child's chest and trunk, and asks the parents how those abrasions occurred. The parents are silent, and Nurse Watkins considers the possibility of child abuse. Ready to fill out a report to Child Protective Services, the nurse recalls that a community healer who had addressed the staff at the home nursing agency had talked about “coining,” a healing approach used in many Laotian families. At the time, the nurse had recoiled at the description of applying hot coins to a child's skin, though she had also reminded herself that some Western medicine healing approaches might appear strange and unnecessarily painful to people from other cultures. She had made a mental note to find out more information about “coining,” but hadn't gotten around to doing so. Today, she makes a call to a friend in the Laotian*

community to help identify a community healer she might talk with, and to ask for assistance in communicating with the family about healing practices.



*On a hot afternoon, Kevin Jones, the athletics director in an after-school program, approaches a young Iranian girl, new to the program, who is sitting on a bench watching the relay race. Encouraging her participation, he tells her to “get into the game!” Shafiqa doesn’t move, and finally says: “I feel too weak. I’m fasting.” The counselor pauses, sure that the girl is on some kind of fad diet, and admonishes her for not eating. “Go to the canteen and get something to eat – it’s stupid to go all day without nourishment.” Tears begin to drip down the girl’s cheek, and she whispers, “I can’t eat today. It’s my family. Please don’t make me run.” He recognizes a feeling of annoyance towards the family for not being sure Shafiqa had breakfast in the morning and a healthy lunch that day. Just then, Shafiqa’s friend rushes over and says: “Leave her alone. It’s Ramadan – it’s her religion. She has to fast.” Kevin feels embarrassed, apologizes to Shafiqa, and wonders why no one on the staff had alerted him. Perhaps they didn’t know either. He pledges to alert the other staff, to ask the parents for more information about Ramadan, and to remember in the future that Shafiqa (and perhaps others in the program) are Muslims and celebrate different holidays than he does as a Christian.*



Kevin Jones and Sara Watkins are working at being culturally competent. For individuals, this involves ongoing learning – about one’s own responses and about the cultures of others – and then changing responses to situations based on that learning. Central to this is becoming aware of one’s own culture, position in society, and assumptions. This may be through learning family history, reading about the history of one’s heritage, and observing carefully what kinds of things seem natural and what seems “different” or “uncomfortable.” Often, it is the moments when a person is tempted to judge negatively the behaviors of people who are different from them that provide clues to their own cultural assumptions or biases. In addition to learning about one’s own culture, it also is important to learn about the history of different cultural groups in the communities served – where they came from, when they came, and why they came – by asking people, by reading, by seeking out community events. And it is important to learn about the history and dynamics of power that have shaped and continue to affect the relationships between cultural groups – both within organizations and in the broader society.

Key to all this is developing the skills of listening carefully, observing without judgment, and recognizing that one person’s way of doing things is not the *only* way – or the best way – it can be done. Attitudes that contribute toward cultural competency also include empathy, comfort with differences, self awareness and reflectiveness, flexibility, and an appreciation of multiple perspectives.

## **What is a Culturally Competent Organization?**

*An after-school program serves a diverse mix of children, and makes an attempt to build relationships across differences. The Arts Counselor, Mary Tompkins, pulls together a*



*group of students and suggests making a mural depicting where families came from and “the wonderful stories” of how they came to the U.S. and California. She begins by modeling her own story of great-great grandparents migrating west in a covered wagon. The group of children – mostly African American, Mexican and Central American immigrants – is noticeably silent. Why won’t they share their stories, she wonders? Why are they so unwilling to participate? Fortunately, that afternoon is the monthly staff discussion that is regularly dedicated to exploring issues of culturally competent practices. Mary describes to the group what happened and asks for other perspectives on what might be going on. José, one of the Latino staff recently hired from the community, shares the fact that many of the immigrant students are undocumented and may be worried about disclosing this fact for fear of their parents being deported. Ed, an African American administrator in the program, shares his personal reaction of feeling the pain of his enslaved ancestors who were forcibly brought to this continent under brutal, inhuman conditions. They put their heads together and design a youth inquiry project through which the children will be able to identify stories from their communities they would like depicted in a mural, share those stories, and paint the wall together.*

As for individuals, cultural competence at the organizational level is an ongoing journey. A culturally competent organization is engaged in an intentional and continuous process of learning about and responding to the cultural contexts of the communities and people it serves. The work isn’t done in a day, and it is never really finished – but the leadership of a culturally competent agency (board, executive, and administration) makes it a priority to create the culture, policies, practices and attitudes that can work toward effectively and respectfully serving diverse populations. This requires:

- being intentional in recruitment and hiring to assemble a diverse staff and board;
- investing in professional development about issues of culture, cultural competence, diversity and equity;
- creating the structures, time and norms for productive dialogue;
- ensuring attention to cultural issues in outreach, programming and service delivery; and
- setting expectations that practices will be adapted to address the needs of the agency’s diverse constituents and clients.

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There is no one template or “one size fits all” model of a culturally competent organization.

Each agency designs its own approaches, based on what will work best for its community, working within the scope of its resources, and utilizing the particular strengths of its board, leadership and staff.

Nonetheless, there are some common characteristics shared by culturally competent organizations, including:

▣ ***Valuing diversity and equity, and institutionalizing these values in policy.***

This may include having a defined set of values, principles, mission statements and/or goals that articulate the value of responding to diversity and a commitment to equity and access to services. Culturally competent organizations do not assume a single common

culture as the “way things are done,” but recognize, seek out and value multiple perspectives. They have policies in place that prohibit prejudiced statements and discriminatory behaviors – with clear consequences for failure to honor these policies. They also often have guidelines and policies that articulate expectations for culturally competent practice, and mandated standards for culturally competent programs, services and events.

▣ ***Being self-reflective.***

Culturally competent organizations keep current on the demographics of the communities they serve, and build relationships with community partners so they can get feedback about the cultural appropriateness and respectfulness of their services. They evaluate their work with attention to issues of respect, inclusion and how effectively they are reaching particular groups or communities. They may also set aside time on a regular basis for self-assessment processes and dialogue about issues of cultural competence.

▣ ***Weaving cultural knowledge throughout the organization’s work.***

Culturally competent organizations integrate cultural knowledge into every facet of what they do. They learn about what would constitute a welcoming environment for the diverse communities they serve, and then create such an environment. They take care that staff are present who speak the languages and share the experiences of the communities they serve, and that materials and resources are culturally relevant and provided in participants’ home languages. They offer positive images of diverse communities – through artwork, music, books and program activities – and welcome family members in culturally appropriate ways. The staff and leadership of culturally competent organizations reflect the make-up of the client populations, and all staff receive professional development and support on appropriate and respectful modes of communication, interaction and service delivery.

▣ ***Supporting staff in expanding their cultural competence.***

In a culturally competent organization, time and resources support talking and learning about issues of culture, inclusion and equity. An organization might set aside regular time for staff to bring up dilemmas and concerns related to cultural dynamics, where multiple

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perspectives can be shared in an atmosphere of learning, honesty, support and common purpose. Sometimes mentors or external resource experts are identified who can be available to help the staff adapt their practices to be more culturally appropriate and effective.

▣ ***Commitment to addressing inequities.***

The leadership of the organization makes it a point to know which groups in the potential client population are not fully receiving the benefits of its services, and actively seeks to understand and rectify any barriers to participation. The board, administration and staff advocate for community conditions that will rectify inequities and exclusion.

▣ ***Integrating the development of cultural competence into programs.***



Helping children and families thrive in a diverse society must include supporting them in developing their own cultural competency. Youth programs, for example, can help young people understand and value their own cultures, languages and communities, and provide opportunities for them to learn about other groups, to discuss intergroup relations and power dynamics, and to build skills for cross cultural collaboration. Programs for parents can include information and support for raising bilingual and bicultural children, and can work to build relationships among parents across different racial and cultural groups in the community.

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## Conclusion

*“If I waited until I knew everything about how to address diversity issues, I would never get started. The learning really begins once you get going!”*

Julie Edwards, Early Childhood Educator  
*Looking In, Looking Out: Redefining Early Care and Education in a Diverse Society*

However large or small an organization, whether it's a beginner or well along the road in addressing issues of cultural competence, there is important work that can be done to become more culturally responsive and respectful. Cultural competence is first and foremost a *commitment* to take the next step, and the next and the next toward offering accessible and appropriate services for the diverse clients and communities being served. Cultural competence begins with the recognition that the goal of healthy outcomes for children and families will remain elusive until and unless this journey is well under way.

## References

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