7.3: Navigating Cultural Differences

Cultural differences can lead to conflicts. For example, people may disagree on practices for handling a baby, responding to crying, or feeding. Home visit staff may be concerned over how and when to intervene in family arguments. Staff and families in early childhood education programs may differ about how programs should support children’s home or native language. Given the wide range of cultural ideas, it is not surprising that adults can have differences that are rooted in the core of their being.

Gonzalez-Mena (1992, 2001, 2008) indicated that these disagreements may be when adults from different cultural backgrounds may find that their familiar ways of working with children are different or when adults within the same culture can disagree. In both of these situations of conflict between program staff and families, Gonzalez-Mena identified four possible outcomes:

1. All sides gain understanding, negotiate, and/or compromise, leading to resolution of the conflict.
2. Program staff understand the families’ perspective(s) and change their practices.
3. Families take on the perspective of the program staff and change their practices.
4. No resolution is reached (here, the conflict may continue or intensify; or both sides can cope with the differences).

Of course, conflicts can occur over numerous issues. To help program staff make progress, Gonzalez-Mena challenges them to question their own assumptions about child development practices (e.g., "My way of thinking about X is not the only way to think about it. My way of doing Practice Y is not the only way to work with the child."). Once this commitment to test one’s own assumptions is in place, two goals for a conflict situation are: (1) to minimize (or eliminate) extreme differences in practices; and (2) to resolve the situation for the benefit of the child. Program staff are encouraged to take a child centered look at any situation of conflicting practices. [86]

The process for each varies greatly not only based on cultures, but even within similar cultures. These practices can
often times go against program policy and best practice as we have been taught in the field. [87]

Pin it! Differences in Feeding Practices

The following is a scenario from the NAEYC’s publication, Diversity and Infant/Toddler Caregiving:

“Junior, who is new to the center, is excited when he sees a bowl of food. The baby makes happy sounds, kicks his legs, and waves his arms. But when Helen puts Junior in the high chair and places the bowl in front of him, he just sits there and makes no attempt to feed himself. He looks confused and becomes distressed. Finally he slumps over, a glazed look in his eyes.

His mother explains later that she has taught Junior not to touch his food. In fact, her son has never been in a high chair; he has always been fed on his mother’s lap, wrapped up tightly in a blanket to discourage him from interfering with her.” [88]

Gonzalez-Mena and Bhavnagri suggest that when the family and program do not agree about a practice or policy, early childhood educators should ask themselves:

1. What is the family’s cultural perspective on the issue?
2. How do the family’s child care practices relate to their cultural perspective?
3. What are the family’s goals for the child? How has the family’s culture influenced these goals?
4. In review of these goals, is the family’s practice in the child’s best interest?
5. Is there any sound research that shows that the family’s practice is doing actual harm?
6. Is the program’s practice or policy universally applicable, or is it better suited to a particular culture?
7. Did the family choose the program because of its particular philosophy, even if it is based on a different culture from their own?
8. Have program staff members attempted to fully understand the family’s rationale for its practices, the complexity of the issues, and other contributing factors?
9. Have staff members attempted to fully explain the rationale for program practices? Have they looked at how their own culture influences their perspective?
10. What are some creative resolutions that address the concerns of both partners and the program? [89]

The point is to begin and continue to dialogue with families and to exchange information with the goal of resolving the conflict for the benefit of the child. The “bottom line” is really: What is in the best interest of the child? As stated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s Code of Ethical Conduct, our first and foremost ethical responsibility to children is to do no harm.

By learning more about the goals that families have for their children, and about the types of behaviors or practices that families prioritize and implement as they raise their children, program staff can more easily match the learning experiences of the classroom to those of the home. For example, if a teacher is concerned that a 3-year-old in her class is not skilled with using a fork, she should first find out if this is a goal of the family. Do they scoop their food at home using spoons? Do they use chopsticks? Do they feed the child or allow the child to self-feed? It is best for the teacher to
check what the family practices and goals are before they misjudge what this child needs from them in terms of support and understanding.

According to National Association for the Education of Young Children’s developmentally appropriate practice one of the tenets is to be culturally responsive. In preparing an environment that supports children and families, we need to ensure that we have considered the beliefs, values, and needs of the family to deliver curriculum that addresses the child both individually and as a group. [90]

These exercises can be done individually and at a staff/team meeting. It’s important to involve the family and all caregivers as a way to ensure all perspectives are heard. Now that questions have been identified, having the conversation to gather the information is next; however, this comes with challenges. As you enter into the conversation, it’s important to put personal biases and beliefs aside and be ready to actively listen to hear and learn about the family and their point of view. [91]