

Taking Steps Toward Cultural Competence Through Meaningful Conversations

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How can busy leaders engage more meaningfully with the experiences and stories of staff, families, and children to understand the way culture and language influence ways of thinking, being, and learning? State and professional standards require foundations of diversity as an essential requirement for linguistically and culturally appropriate practice. Program leaders and staff are required to participate in trainings that focus on the relationships among culture, race, and language and learn about the ways family contexts can be utilized as strengths to understand and teach children. Many quality checklists require programs to represent diversity in classrooms, with a resulting abundance of community helper accessories with disabilities in block areas, cloth dolls with various skin tones in the housekeeping areas, and plastic chop suey and pizza in the pretend kitchens. But do these efforts to add diverse materials to classrooms qualify as “adding diversity” to the curriculum?

Because ways of caring for and interacting with children are culturally determined, exploring staff beliefs about teaching and caring for children is an important part of developing [cultural competence](#). Studies find that early childhood educators are less likely than other educators to expect [bias to be present in programs](#). This mindset is known as the “bias blind spot,” where staff may recognize bias in others but not in themselves. Leaders can set aside time for staff to share their experiences, reflect on their perceptions, and explore the ways values and expectations may inadvertently impact judgments about and communication with others.

Some of you may work in programs that reflect many kinds of family and staff diversities in language, race, culture, socioeconomic status, family structure, gender, age, and more. Others may work in programs that represent a single race, culture, or language. Even when programs are mono-cultural, conversations about culture provide a necessary anchor for developing an understanding of self and others and for exploring the role of culture in all aspects of organizational functioning.

The [NAEYC Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement](#) (2019) encourages leaders to view the classroom and program through the eyes of children and their families. It states that children should “demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities; and will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring human connections across diverse backgrounds” (5). Important recommendations include that programs will “uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family and ensure that all children see themselves and their daily experiences, as well as the daily lives of others within and beyond their community, positively reflected in the design and implementation of pedagogy, curriculum, learning environment, interactions, and materials. They celebrate diversity by acknowledging similarities and differences and provide perspectives that recognize beauty and value across differences” (7).

The [NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement](#) (2020) also provides guidance for program staff to examine classroom experiences through the eyes of children and families. It suggests that “curriculum should provide mirrors so that children see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the learning environment, materials, and activities. The curriculum should also provide windows on the world so that children learn about peoples, places, arts, sciences, and so on that they would otherwise not encounter. In diverse and inclusive learning communities, one child’s mirrors are another child’s windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning” (25).

What do you imagine when you read these inspiring goals? Does your thinking fill with ideas about how families can experience a caring and inclusive community and ways children can have a sense of continuity between their homes and the program? Or does your program need support to move from great ideas to practice? Have you been planning on bringing staff together to talk about strengthening diversity in all areas of program life? Maybe you have been considering new ways to guide reflective practice to explore inclusive approaches to teaching.

The best steps forward start simply, by learning more about yourself, your staff, families, and children. There are many ways to create a vital learning community that reflects genuine inclusiveness in communication and practice. The goal is to get started by exploring steps that fit with your own and your program’s specific needs. Below are some helpful steps for busy leaders.

1. Start where you are in your journey and take steps to [create positive change](#). Think about your own ideas and feelings related to those who represent cultures different from your own. What do you really think about children and families? What do you really enjoy about your current program focus – and what do you wish you could do differently? The following questions can guide ongoing reflection.

- How do you imagine families feel when they enter your program and classrooms?
- What experiences contribute to family safety and belonging?
- What interactions have been effective in developing relationships with families?
- What obstacles or barriers have prevented deeper conversations or the development of trust with families?
- What are you doing or would you like to do to guide staff exploration of diversity and dive deeper into promoting family and children’s authentic connections to the program?
- How can you help your staff strengthen their pride and commitment to fostering a more inclusive, safe learning community?
- What are some first steps that come to mind when you think about building a more diverse and inclusive program?

2. Activate [reflective practice with your staff](#). Identify time to talk individually and as a group with staff. Encourage staff to set aside time to explore their ideas. When bringing teachers together to talk about diversity, the following questions can spur new insights and [strengthen relationships among staff](#).

- What child rearing beliefs were important in your home of origin?
- What do you value about your own cultural identities?

- What child rearing values and goals do families have for the children in your classroom?
- What have you learned about how your own ways of being differ from those of other staff and families?
- What [family funds of knowledge](#) are present in your program, and how can these strengthen your teaching practice?
- What does it mean to have a cultural context for learning and development?
- How may communication, goal-setting, and priorities differ across contexts?
- What cultural and linguistic assets do children experience in their homes, neighborhoods, and extended family?

3. Invite families to engage in [meaningful connections](#). Consider moving beyond one-on-one meetings with families. Add family chat groups that focus on topics of high interest requested by families. Connect families that share similar experiences during coffee or virtual events at times that work for their busy schedules. Reconvene your family advisory board and family focus groups and use the following questions as a conversation guide.

- In what ways do families see themselves reflected in and included in the life of the program?
- What do families wish for in the program? What else would they like to see, experience, contribute, and do?
- What do families hope for their children? What character traits and skills do they value?
- What are family insights about the classroom or program? Does the program feel “like home” to their children? What would make it more inclusive?
- What do families observe their children doing in the classroom that feels meaningful and personal?
- How are families invited into the classroom to read, share skills, and spend time with their children?
- What practices, traditions, attributes of the setting, messages, or interactions are missing but would be valued by families? Would families be willing to share these with the teachers and children?
- What else would families like to tell you about their children, their experiences, or the program?

4. Use materials to inspire great conversations [in the classroom](#). The goal of reflecting diversity in classrooms can be met by incorporating cultural artifacts from families that are meaningful to the children and that allow play to reflect what children experience at home. Cultural and linguistic diversity can be represented through objects familiar in children’s homes, families, and communities. Messages should promote pride and acceptance of diversities, including skin color, languages, family structures, abilities, and gender roles.

Importantly, diverse materials provide teachers with opportunities to talk with children about their families, how they help at home, activities they enjoy with friends, and adventures they enjoy in the

neighborhood. Beyond the materials, the conversations should promote pride in the home and family and confidence in developing one's sense of self.

- Invite families to share items for the classroom and spend time in the classroom reading and sharing songs and skills.
- Include songs, lullabies, and fingerplays that represent the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the families.
- Place family photos, posters, and child-safe mirrors at children's eye level.
- Create a photo "me" book for each child.
- Incorporate family suggestions for dramatic play that can represent items and experiences in the home.
- Talk personally with children to build pride in their families. Use familiar words for families and high-frequency words from the child's home language.
- Include books and stories that reflect the lives and contexts of children in the program and that introduce children to new and interesting experiences and people.

The direct path toward positive change is to take one small step at a time – and then another. Ask staff and families what steps they would like to take. Together, explore the many available resources for growth and reflection that address culture and cultural competence. Together, you can create a more cohesive and vibrant learning community that embraces cultural competency as foundational to an inclusive, caring community.

For additional information, please see the following resources:

- [Cultural Competence](#)
- [Cultural Competency](#) in Early Care and Education Classrooms
- [Culture and Language](#): Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders
- [Diversity, Equity, and Cultural Competence](#)
- [Listening](#): A Key to Cultural Competence
- [The ABCs of Diversity and Inclusion](#): Developing an Inclusive Environment for Diverse Families in Early Childhood Education
- [Rethinking Cultural Competence](#): Shifting to Cultural Humility
- [Standard 4](#): Developmentally, Culturally, and Linguistically Appropriate Teaching Practices
- [Valuing Diversity](#): Developing a Deeper Understanding of All Young Children's Behavior

Note: The above content is adapted from Chapter 7: Setting Priorities for High-Quality Teaching in Dr. Masterson's forthcoming book, *Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Care for Infants and Toddlers: Strategies for High Quality Teaching*, published by Teachers College Press.

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