

# Listening: A Key to Cultural Competence

BY NASSER NABHAN

*“Listening is where love begins: listening to ourselves and then to our neighbors.” – Fred Rogers*

In the field of early care and education there is no shortage of terms, trainings, articles, and books highlighting the need to develop cultural awareness and competence. While many of these resources are excellent and essential, the content can sometimes feel overwhelming. Leaders can memorize the terms and definitions, attend the trainings, and read books and articles on the topic and still feel inadequately prepared to work with the diverse staff, parents, and children in their early care and education programs. I know I certainly did when I started teaching and in my work as a program administrator. Listening became the key to fostering stronger relationships with those around me and becoming a better leader.

During my first few years of teaching, I worked at a center-based program where many of my students recently immigrated to the United States from Mexico. I was eager to celebrate the children’s Mexican heritage in the classroom, and I assumed that Cinco de Mayo would be one time to do that. I started to explore different activities that could be connected to the holiday. My co-teacher, who was of Mexican heritage, told me that the children and parents in our classroom likely did not celebrate [Cinco de Mayo](#) in the ways that I presumed. The holiday is not ubiquitously celebrated and observed throughout Mexico. Her insights made me step back and think more critically about my assumptions. I learned that I needed to ensure that families had the space and opportunity to inform me about their culture. This meant asking questions and actively listening to the parents and children in the program.

Below are tips for engaging with and listening to children, families, and staff to foster strong relationships and promote understanding in culturally diverse environments:

- Reflect on who you are as a person, what assumptions you may bring to the environment, and your perspectives about teaching, culture, and relationships.
- Ask children, families, and staff open-ended questions such as, “Could you tell me about a holiday that you celebrate and what it means to you?”
- Listen actively. Don’t just hear the words someone shares with you; make a conscious effort to process and understand the message.
- Listen patiently. Not everyone will respond in the same timeframe that you expect. Young children, especially need time to process and share their stories and ideas.
- Be open to whatever staff and families tell you in the moment. They might not answer your question, but they may give you other information that is much more important for you to learn.
- Follow up if you don’t understand something. Be sure to confirm what someone has shared by asking additional questions or restating what they said, rather than assuming you understood them.
- Present opportunities for various types of expression and knowledge sharing. When there is a language barrier, be sure to engage families and staff in different ways to express their identity

and experiences. For example, ask families to share music, food, dance, and stories that can enrich the classrooms and program.

- Seek feedback from staff. While this article focuses on families, most leaders miss the opportunity to gather feedback from staff. What do they see as the families' needs? How do they want to highlight cultural experiences and support cultural identity and pride in children and families?

The world is complex and diverse. A single country may represent dozens of native languages, ethnicities, and cultures. Such diversity necessitates engaging with the world around us in new and more sensitive ways. Listening provides an invaluable opportunity to learn from and celebrate our programs' children, families, and staff. As program leaders, we should always take the time to listen and learn from those around us; these connections are often the most critical path to becoming more culturally competent.

## RESOURCES

Alanís Iliana, Iruka, I. U., & Friedman, S. (2021). *Advancing Equity & Embracing Diversity in early childhood education: Elevating voices & actions*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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