

# Closing the Gap

## Culture and the Promotion of Inclusion in Child Care

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**THREE TRENDS ARE OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE** in preparing early childhood professionals to meet the needs of children and families. These trends are demographic changes in the U.S. population resulting in the increased diversity of families' cultural backgrounds (Brewer & Suchan 2001); the movement toward inclusion and recognition of the rights of all children to be cared for in natural environments (Odon, Teferra, & Kaul 2004); and the increased prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children (Koppelman 2004).

Using real-world examples drawn from the Models of Inclusion in Child Care project (Brennan et al. 2003), this article examines the interface between attention to families' cultural backgrounds and the ability of early childhood programs to be successful in providing inclusive care for children with disabilities and challenging behaviors. Nine child care centers across the United States participated in this research. These programs provide care for children with different types of disabilities and children with emotional and behavioral challenges alongside children without such challenges or delays. The ages of children enrolled in the programs ranged from birth to 13 years, though most children were younger than six years. Some families reported that their children had been excluded previously from one or more child care programs due to disruptive behavior.

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The research findings from the Models of Inclusion in Child Care project indicate that attention to families' cultures is essential for the successful inclusion of children with challenging behaviors. Based on the analysis of more than 90 interviews with directors, staff, and parents, this article discusses how professionals' understanding of families' cultural backgrounds supports the centers' success in providing inclusive care for diverse children with disabilities or challenging behaviors. It concludes with five recommendations for early childhood professionals.

### Inclusion and culture

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The nine centers in the Models of Inclusion project (Brennan et al. 2003) were selected to vary in size, location, funding arrangements, and the population served. It was evident, however, that all of the centers shared a vision of inclusion that was crucial to their success in integrating children with disabilities or emotional and behavioral challenges. Inclusion was an intentional process that shaped the design and delivery of the child care programs. One staff member explained, "Families are a grand spectrum, and we . . . embrace them no matter what and do what we can to help their kids."

Center staff at all levels shared a philosophy of inclusion, and administrators and senior staff continually reinforced the philosophy through their efforts to embed strategies for inclusion in all center activities. This was achieved through an individualized approach to caring for each child and family. Staff worked to build relationships with families. They engaged in ongoing communication and problem solving to identify resources and agree on intervention strategies to provide the support necessary for inclusion even when children had challenging behaviors. Classroom activities were designed with built-in

flexibility to accommodate children with different needs. For example, teachers gave advance notice of changes in activities to support children who found transitions stressful. Staff made efforts to build connections between the center and home for all families—for instance, providing children’s reading materials in the family’s primary language if parents did not speak English.

The work of each center was founded on a clear and explicit philosophy of serving all children and families. The values, principles, and practices that supported the centers’ inclusion of children with challenging behaviors also supported the centers’ efforts to work successfully with children and families from varied cultural backgrounds. For example, teachers used stick figures or other visual materials to give children clear information about desired goals and expectations for behavior. They used multiple methods of communication simultaneously to support children with difficulties in processing information due to cognitive deficits. This practice also helped children to overcome linguistic barriers and speech difficulties.

Early childhood educators and families may experience barriers in supporting children’s learning and development when the children’s behavior is disruptive. Cultural differences between staff and families can lead to additional barriers. Culture has been defined in different ways. One expert defines culture as consisting of “shared elements that provide the standards for perceiving, believing, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historic period, and a geographic location” (Triandis 1996, 409). Although there is no single agreed-upon definition of culture, culture influences our thoughts and behaviors and is shared by a group, passed on to members of the group, and changes over time (O’Hagan 1999; Greenfield et al. 2003). One teacher interviewed in the research explained her experience of learning about cultural differences during her first year of working with children from Latino families:

There were a lot of things I had to learn. Just the nature of the children, the things they would do differently, and the reasons behind it . . . The way things were at home was different from [my] culture.

She described the need to adapt her customary practice of expecting children to “look her in the eye” when she was addressing them, in recognition of culturally based variations in nonverbal communication and “looking down” as a sign of respect for the teacher.

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## Cultural awareness

Although cultural differences are often discussed in terms of ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity, staff in these nine centers also talked about the importance of other dimensions of culture, such as region or geographic location, religion, and socioeconomic status. One director described working with families from a rural area:

[Families in our rural setting have] a very independent culture . . . [and] they’re very reticent to ask for help. They’re suspicious of outside interference in their family structure, and you have to gain their trust. If you’re not from . . . that little geographical area, you’re an outsider; they don’t think you understand how they do things.

One of the challenges of understanding different cultures is that while some aspects, such as language or dress, are easily discerned, many aspects are less obvious. The research identified four characteristics of culture as important considerations when working with families from

diverse backgrounds: values and beliefs, historical and social influences, communication, and attitude toward seeking help (see “Cultural Dimensions of Families”).

Developing cultural awareness is an ongoing process. Several staff inter-

viewed in the study talked about the importance of taking a positive approach and being open to continuous learning. One teacher noted, “If it’s something that I’m not familiar with, then it’s a learning opportunity.” Staff described the need to learn about culturally based practices such as how family decisions are made and who is involved in the process. Staff intentionally sought to involve families in their children’s care by providing varied opportunities, including open invitations to parents to spend time in the classroom, parent presentations to share culture-specific information with staff and children, volunteer opportunities, parent information events, and regular social events with other families at the center. Building relationships with parents included efforts to learn about families by asking them specific questions about their cultures, such as what holidays they do or don’t celebrate and their food preferences or prohibitions. In addition, staff asked families about their goals and expectations for their child.

When accompanied by linguistic barriers, cultural differences can pose particular challenges for families and staff. In her book describing the experiences of immigrant refugees in the United States, Mary Pipher proposes two simple rules for working with people for whom English is a new language: Don’t assume anything and Ask questions (Pipher 2002, 353). The directors and teachers in the Models of Inclusion research echoed

these rules, and noted the importance of resources such as translation services and interpreters to support their work with families. Families valued staff efforts to partner with them in exchanging information in an accessible way. One family member explained,

When you are here, you have the possibility of sharing. For example, the teacher says, "What do you think? What are you going to do if you have a problem with your child in the school?" And the teachers explain to you in Spanish and English . . . what you can do. That is important.

### Respecting cultural differences

It was evident from the Models of Inclusion in Child Care research that family involvement is crucial to the successful inclusion of children with disabilities or challenging behaviors, and that understanding a family's culture is essential in building relationships between families and center staff. However, cultural differences can pose challenges for staff and for families. Researchers identified two important potential sources of difference: norms of privacy and perceptions of child development.

### Privacy issues

Programs used open-ended questions to bring out whatever information—if any—families wanted to share about themselves. One staff member explained that cultural sensitivity can help staff understand and accept families' different perspectives on information sharing:

It is very difficult for [some families] to share information about their private lives. And we often feel that the only way we can truly do our job is to have all this informa-

## Cultural Dimensions of Families

Four dimensions of culture are listed here with questions that encourage early childhood professionals to further explore the influences of culture in their work. The questions can be modified for individual self-assessment, for use as a tool to explore differences among staff, or as the basis for discussing cultural issues with families.

Dimensions	Questions for reflection and/or discussion
Values and beliefs	How is family defined? What roles do adults and children play? How does the family make sense of a child's behavioral difficulties? How does culture inform the family's view of appropriate/inappropriate ways of dealing with problem behavior and guiding children? What is most important to the family?
Historical and social influences	What strengths and stressors does the family identify? What barriers do they experience?
Communication	What is the family's primary language? What support is required to enable communication? How are needs and wants expressed? How is unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or distress experienced and expressed?
Attitude toward seeking help	How does the family seek help and from whom? How do members view professionals, and how do professionals view them?

tion. But I think [we need] to remember that we have to respect what [families] are comfortable with, as far as what they feel like they can share.

For example, in some families, mothers did not feel comfortable sharing information about the family without a male family member present.

As noted by one director, it is essential for teachers to ask themselves, how can we offer support to families rather than make judgments about them? Understanding a family's culture helps staff to withhold judgment, to manage the frustration that can arise from differences, and to continue efforts to build relationships with the family and gain family members' trust.

### Perceptions of difference in ability

The second important issue for successful inclusion of children with disabilities or challenging behaviors is cultural differences in how child development is perceived by families and teachers. Cultural beliefs may have a significant impact on parents' expectations about their child's behavior and ability. One director describes some of the challenges that can arise when a child has a disability:

[Families] are sometimes fatalistic in their outlook [regarding] . . . the potential their child might have. And [reluctant] to accept support in helping the child reach that potential. [A family's attitude may be,] "Well, this is the way he was born, and we just have to live with it."

The gaps that arise from cultural differences in professional and family perspectives on appropriate ways to support a child's development can lead to frustration and difficulty in developing the necessary partnerships. It is essential that staff take the time to understand how family members make sense of their child's experience and behaviors. Additionally, it is important that staff recognize the

benefits families can gain from connecting to the strengths of their cultures and accessing the resources of their cultural communities (Hunt 2004). Parents can benefit from the support of other families with similar experiences who share culturally appropriate information about strategies they have found useful—for example, strategies to help their children gain more control over their behavior by learning to manage stress and increase self-regulation.

On the other hand, parents who have a child with challenging behaviors or a disability may have to deal with isolation, blame, shame, or other forms of stigma in the community. In our research, staff recognized the importance of providing support for the whole family as a way of supporting the child. One way teachers supported families was by creating opportunities for families to meet each other during parent education and center social events and by acting as brokers to connect families with local resources, such as health care, social services, housing, and agencies providing culture-specific services.

Research shows that families that have children with challenging behaviors frequently do not receive the support and services they need (Knitzer 2002), and when such families are members of minority groups, they are even less likely to have access to preventive and mental health services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health 2003). It is increasingly important that early childhood professionals extend the skills and strategies they use when including children with disabilities or emotional and behavioral challenges to encompass the cultural context of the family. While children's needs change with their continued growth and development, an individualized approach informed by the family's culture is an essential part of promoting healthy development for all children. For some families that have children with disabilities or challenging behaviors, the support available through an early childhood setting may be their first opportunity to get the help they need.

**Cultural sensitivity can help staff understand and accept families' different perspectives on information sharing.**

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## Selected Resources on Culture and Challenging Behavior in Early Childhood Settings

**Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior** is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, to increase the awareness and implementation of positive, evidence-based practices and to build an enhanced, accessible database to support those practices. <http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/index.html>

**Center for Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning**, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (phone: 217-333-0260), focuses on improving social and emotional outcomes for young children through the provision of resources on evidence-based practice, training materials, and information about state-level strategic planning. Spanish language materials are available. <http://csefel.uiuc.edu>

**Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS)** (phone: 877-275-3227) offers resources including practitioner guidelines for the selection of linguistically and culturally appropriate materials and literature reviews of topics in child development and early education. <http://clas.uiuc.edu>

**Family Support America** (phone: 312-338-0900) is an advocacy organization promoting family support by providing information resources on a range of topics, including disabilities, in addition to technical assistance and training materials. [www.familysupportamerica.org](http://www.familysupportamerica.org)

**National Center for Cultural Competence**, Georgetown University, has a self-assessment tools checklist that includes some tools designed for professionals providing services in early childhood settings. <http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc/selfassessment.html>

For resources on culture and mental health, search under "culture, ethnicity, and mental health."

[www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp)

**Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health**, Portland State University, Oregon (phone: 503-725-4040), conducts collaborative research and disseminates information for families, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers concerned with improving services for children and families with emotional and behavioral disorders. [www.rtc.pdx.edu](http://www.rtc.pdx.edu)

## Recommendations

Here are some recommendations to support early childhood professionals in their practice with families from diverse cultural backgrounds and their children who have disabilities or challenging behaviors.

**Learn from families.** Families are the experts in their culture, and early childhood professionals should be proactive in learning from them. Families can share information about their hopes and dreams, their goals for their children, and their expectations regarding the program and staff. As they interact with families, it is important for staff to be aware of how their own cultural backgrounds and professional education and experiences shape their personal values and professional roles. Professional knowledge is developed in a cultural context, and thus influenced by assumptions about children's behavior that are informed by the dominant cultural view. When professionals are both aware of their own culture and recognize the importance of a family's culture, they are in a better position to provide the individualized services necessary for inclusion. By integrating the family's in-depth knowledge of and goals for their child, professionals can apply their expertise in a culturally appropriate manner.

**Beware of stereotyping families, and practice a nonjudgmental, unprejudiced attitude.** Views of childrearing practices and norms for children's expression and behavior are shaped by culture. Thus, teachers should strive to remain as objective as possible when working with culturally diverse young children with challenging behaviors. The response of parents and professionals to a child's behavior will vary in different cultural contexts. In problem situations, teachers can reduce the likelihood of culturally based misinterpretation by seeking explanations from the family or from a person well versed in the family's culture. Simi-

larly, plans to remedy situations should consider the family's cultural beliefs and practices.

**Network with community organizations serving cultural/ethnic groups.** Organizations serving particular cultural and ethnic groups exist in many communities. Building networks between early childhood programs and community groups with expertise that is culture-specific is essential in increasing the ability of professionals to work effectively with diverse children with disabilities or challenging behaviors and their families. This type of partnership provides access to information about different cultural groups and facilitates connections between families and others who share their culture. In addition, such organizations may be able to provide cultural consultation, for example to assist an interdisciplinary team engaged in developing specific interventions for a child with behavioral challenges.

**Include cultural backgrounds and disabilities in curricula, staff training, and other aspects of the program.** The center's core mission, providing high-quality inclusive care that meets the needs of all children and families, can be enhanced by creating opportunities to promote respect for differences and increased understanding of different sources of diversity, including cultural background and disability. This can be done at a number of levels.

For example, racial/cultural socialization refers to practices that are unique to an individual, family, or community of a given background and that distinguish the individual, family, or community from other groups in society. Early childhood professionals should consider inte-

grating culturally specific activities into a center's programming as a way of upholding and celebrating racial and cultural diversity. Families can contribute to this process by sharing their cultural knowledge. It is important to share information with families during planning, so that such activities are done only with the knowledge and approval of all families.

Similarly, it is important to examine activities such as staff training or parent education sessions for cultural bias and to ensure that the experiences of families from diverse cultural backgrounds are represented.

**Look for commonalities among children and families.** Although children's development is rooted in culture, and culture provides an important lens through which to view development, most human beings share similarities in physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development (Greenfield et al. 2003). Not only should teachers look for commonalities among the children and families they serve, but they should also note how such commonalities are shaped and influenced by race, ethnicity, and cultural orientation. Thus, for example, when a child's behavior disrupts the class, it is important to consider a range of possible explanations. The meaning of a child's behavior can change over time according to the stage of development. In addition, the meaning of behavior can vary according to the cultural context and individual differences. Staff understanding of a family's culture is an essential element of their ability to provide inclusive care for diverse children with disabilities or challenging behaviors and their families.