

5. Cultural Competency

A. Definition

“Cultural competence” has been defined by DHS as the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, disabilities, religions, genders, sexual orientation and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities, and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

Operationally defined, it is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes.

To be “culturally competent” requires more than having knowledge of certain cultural groups. It is the ability to:

- Understand cultural differences,
- Recognize one’s own potential biases, and
- Transcend differences to work productively with people whose cultural context is different from one’s own.

B. Application of Cultural Competence to Casework Practice

A culturally competent child welfare professional is able to use information about a client’s culture and respectfully:

- Work with families,
- Develop a helping relationship,
- Formulate a case plan, and
- Offer culturally sensitive services.

If the child welfare caseworker does not understand the meaning of a particular cultural behavior, miscommunication and misinterpretation may occur. One can inadvertently offend a family if the “social rules” of the culture are not known. The disrespect communicated by lack of adherence to the culture’s social rules can interfere with a relationship.

C. Developing Culturally Competent Helping Relationships

When working with families from cultures different from your own, there are important principles that must be considered in order to ensure that the services provided are helpful and appropriate. It is important for Child Welfare caseworkers to examine their own attitudes and belief system as it may affect their decisions and practice. They need to be grounded in their own culture and personal biases before being able to fully understand cross-cultural issues. It is important to view the unfamiliar nature of the situation without assumptions, judgments, and expectations. Caseworkers

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need to be able to approach and interact with family members in culturally appropriate ways and to respect the cultural practices and values of the families with whom they interact.

While all people share common basic needs, there are differences in how people of various cultures meet and prioritize those needs. Differences can be as important as similarities. Just because a behavior or interaction is different than what a caseworker may be familiar or comfortable with, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is "less" correct.

There are specific actions and behaviors that caseworkers can practice that support the delivery of culturally appropriate interactions and client rapport-building. They include:

- Do not assume which family member should be spoken to first. This varies from culture to culture and an incorrect assumption may interfere with the information you receive. Identify which family member(s) should be addressed first. For some cultures, it is important to identify and address the family member from whom approval needs to be obtained. Ignoring this could result in alienation and could possibly communicate unintended arrogance on your part. For example, in some cultures, the female is responsible for interacting with the visitor while the male, who is dominant, sits and listens observantly. With this example, you may be addressing the female, but she may continue to glance at her husband to discern his perception of the conversation. One approach for handling this is to request direction from the family.
- Addressing the client by name. Ask the client how they wish to be addressed. It may be perceived as disrespectful and impolite to refer to yourself and the client by first name. You may introduce yourself as follows: "Hello, Mr. ____; I am [first name] [last name]. At some point early in the interview, ask the client how he/she would like to be addressed: Do not assume you know the ethnic identity of a person. Ask the client/family members how they identify themselves culturally or ethnically. People from the same ethnic group may identify themselves differently. For example, the terms Hispanic, Latino/Latina, Chicano/Chicana, Mexican, Mexican National, and Mexican-American, have individual meaning and importance for people of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- Caseworkers should be aware that their body position, the amount of physical distance between themselves and their client and their use of eye contact may be perceived differently by their client than what they might expect. Some cultures do not allow physical touch between strangers, which includes handshaking. While some cultures recognize a firm and strong handshake as a sign of respect, other cultures (e.g., Native American) respect a soft handshake and perceive a firm handshake as a sign of aggression or uncouthness; and others do not believe in any physical contact in public; making handshakes an unwelcome greeting.
- The same is true in determining "appropriate distance" or the use of direct eye contact. In some cultures, eye contact is an indication that a connection has been made and that a relationship has been formed. In such cultures, lack of eye contact is sometimes perceived as a lack of trust or an indication of dishonesty. In other cultures direct eye contact indicate a lack of respect or arrogance and should be avoided. Be aware of this and examine your own perceptions regarding eye contact.

- Graciously accept or know how to tactfully decline the offer of food or refreshments. In many cultures, it is customary to offer food and refreshments to visitors, often before any formal conversation is undertaken. If you decide that you do not want to accept the offer of food, make certain that you decline in a respectful manner. One tactful method of declining refreshments is to suggest that you have already eaten or are on a special diet. If the food or refreshment looks unappetizing to you, refrain from any facial expression that may suggest disapproval.

D. Family Members' Skills, Strengths, and Dysfunction within a Cultural Context

Identifying *strengths* suggests underlying values. Family strengths within a cultural context must be appreciated. If one values individuality and self-assertion, then the ability to “take charge” would be considered a strength. In cultures that highly value group harmony, the ability to negotiate and come to consensus would be considered a strength. In a group in which only certain members of the family make the major decisions, the ability to gracefully accept the decision without protest may be considered a strength. A trait must be measured by its efficacy within a specific cultural context.

What may not appear to a child welfare professional as a “strength” in a particular case situation may have considerable adaptive integrity within the family’s cultural context. Unless the child welfare professional recognizes this, a behavior may be seen as indicating a lack of adaptability and general dysfunction. In fact, it may indicate the person has adapted well within her subculture, even though her behavior may be problematic. Such assessments are complicated by what appear to be the benefits of assimilating into the larger culture. For example, a Child Welfare professional may want to explain the advantages of individuality and self-reliance to survive in our competitive, technological and economic environment. The Child Welfare professional must realize, however, that a family’s “feet” may simultaneously be in more than one culture and must accept the family’s right and need to behave accordingly.

Dysfunction also must be viewed within a cultural context. Dysfunction literally means that something does not work in a particular situation. Dysfunctional behavior refers to behavior that creates and maintains problems rather than solving them.

For a family member to feel that a trait or an attribute is a skill, it has to be something that is valued by her culture. A caseworker might not recognize a family’s strength or skill unless it is assessed in context. For example, feeding a child a diet of beans and rice is a resourceful way to provide the maximum nutrition and eliminate feeling hungry on a very limited budget. Out of context, the trait could be viewed as “laziness,” or “unwillingness to prepare creative and well-balanced meals.”

Being culturally competent also requires knowing the issues associated with acculturation and assimilation, as well as being aware of how individuals may differ along these dimensions. In all cases, the caseworker must determine the extent to which the guidelines are true for the current family. Caseworkers must avoid stereotyping and not assume that these conditions are true simply because the family is a member of a specific ethnic group.

E. Summary

No child welfare professional can ever know all that is relevant about every cultural group. Interaction with families is itself a learning process; as is the process of becoming culturally competent. The keys to cultural competence are respect for differences, curiosity about learning to understand another's point of view, skill in observation and other indirect and direct ways of learning, and willingness to consider and incorporate differences in interactions with others.



Forms and References

References

- University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work. (1997) Core I Curriculum. Denver, CO: University of Denver
- Multi-Cultural Guidelines for Assessing Family Strengths and Risk Factors in child Protective Services, by the Washington Risk Assessment Project (2/24/93)
- State of Oregon, DHS – Diversity Development Coordinating Council