**Understanding and Negotiating Cultural Differences Concerning Early Developmental Competence:  
*The six raisin solution***

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*"I'm so frustrated!" announced Joann as she stormed into her early intervention director's office. "I'm just not getting through to Rosa. I know she's a very loving mother to Maria, but she just doesn't follow through with any of my suggestions. I put Maria in her high chair today and gave her some crackers that I brought. Rosa is always quiet and nods when I tell her how much Maria needs to learn to finger-feed herself, but I know she never lets Maria touch the food when I'm not there. I could hear Rosa running the bath water before I even closed the apartment door today. Why is she so worried about Maria making a little mess? As the occupational therapist, it's my job to help Maria learn to use her hands. Even though Maria's 2 1/2 years old, developmentally she's only about 11 months old. She still puts everything in her mouth, so the only small things we can give her are pieces of food. How can I get Rosa to understand? I know it's not a language issue, because Rosa told me on my first visit that she is from a bilingual family and is as comfortable in English as she is in Spanish. I just don't know what else I can do!"*

When our cultural assumptions, beliefs and values are violated, we all react with strong emotions. Shock and a sense of bewilderment often overwhelm us, limiting our responses and generating immense barriers to effective communication. Joann knows she is frustrated. What she does not know is that she has unwittingly violated Rosa's cultural assumptions regarding appropriate child-rearing goals, developmental expectations and parenting practices. Both Joann and Rosa are aware that something is not working in their efforts to help Maria, but neither understands cultural processes well enough to negotiate these barriers to effective collaboration.

This article describes a staff development model that is designed to help practitioners who work with infants, young children and their families build more collaborative and effective cross-cultural relationships. We have tested this model with several groups of practitioners, including regular and special education early childhood teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as physical, occupational, and speech/language therapists. Content of the training is based upon current cultural research (our own and others') that provides insight into cultural variations in parenting and describes culturally diverse pathways to developmental competence. This approach offers practitioners something more than a general belief in the need for "cultural sensitivity" and some limited knowledge of common parenting practices among particular cultural groups. Understanding why parents and families value particular parenting practices enables practitioners to discuss and negotiate any changes that might further their children's developmental competence respectfully, from within the parents' perspective. Such truly collaborative goal setting is the key to effective early intervention services among the increasingly diverse populations found in the United States today. Our collective failure to understand and respect the cultural beliefs and values of diverse families may help to explain the consistent under-utilization of early intervention services by non-European-American minorities nationwide (Arcia & Gallagher, 1993; Arcia, Keyes, Gallagher, & Herrick, 1993; Bennett, Zhang, & Hojnar, 1998).

The processes required to identify, adapt to, and respect diverse pathways to developmental competence form the core components of culturally sensitive practice. Our staff development model includes four workshop sessions presented over a period of about two months. Each presentation lasts about one hour and includes a group activity and facilitated discussion. All staff members are encouraged to participate actively in all aspects of the training and to share personal reflections throughout the training process. We will follow Joann as she participates in this staff development program and begins to build a more collaborative and effective relationship with Rosa.

**Culture as shared knowledge**

Joann and her colleagues begin their training by learning to think about culture as shared knowledge about how the world works. We use this cultural knowledge to interpret events and experiences in our lives. Often this cultural knowledge is unspoken or assumed. We become aware of it only when assumptions are violated. Think of your reaction when someone violates your idea of adequate personal space between social partners. Violations of cultural assumptions lead to strong affective responses. Cultural knowledge is based upon our interactions with others and is continually modified in the context of these interactions. For example, New Englanders who move to California may eventually learn to accept a hug instead of a handshake as an appropriate greeting between casual acquaintances. We acquire cultural knowledge through our life experiences and social interactions. Ethnicity is not the same as culture. To the extent that ethnicity contributes to our life experiences and social interactions, it contributes to our cultural knowledge, but so do other important factors such as education, regional characteristics, travel, religious beliefs, membership in particular population cohorts, social-economic status, and work experiences.

*Joann began to think about how her education, work experience, family roles, and religion had contributed to her understanding of how the world works. She also thought about how nice it is to meet someone with whom you share many similar life experiences. Friendships are often based upon such common backgrounds, so that each partner feels almost immediately that she has known the other for a long time. Joann began to understand that the easy sense of comfort and competence which characterizes her work with middle-class Anglo families is a result of the wide variety of life experiences which they share with her. She began to realize that the frequent frustrations and misunderstandings in her work with Rosa might be the result of quite different life experiences and a relative lack of shared knowledge.*

Learning to bridge gaps in shared knowledge requires two complementary and ongoing processes: self-awareness of one's own cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs; and willingness to explore the cultural knowledge of others in the full context of their personal and shared histories, assumptions, goals, beliefs, and practices.

It is important to stop here and consider the difference between shared knowledge and cultural agreements among groups of people vs. individual beliefs, values, and practices. Researchers analyze cultural differences between groups based on overall group tendencies. This general knowledge may provide us with a basis for introducing cultural conversations, but it does not tell us about the ways in which members of a group may differ among themselves. We must develop our own personal skills to build self-awareness and promote respectful cultural sharing and exploration with the families we serve.

In order to build a framework for comprehensive understanding of cultural beliefs and values related to parenting, we must first understand a culture's long-term socialization goals for children. Personal awareness begins with thoughtful consideration of the question "What qualities would you like your child (real or hypothetical) to possess when he or she is an adult?" The qualities that we hope to inculcate in our children are windows into the personal and community values that we hold most dear. Current research finds striking patterns of agreement within cultural groups in the choices of long-term socialization goals (Harwood, Schoelmerich, & Handwerker, 1999). For example, although variation within a group always exists, there is a general tendency for members of Anglo groups to emphasize goals related to the maximization of the self (people should be happy, confident, independent, intelligent, and assertive) and to balance these with qualities of lovingness (people should be kind, caring, and compassionate). Similarly, there is a tendency for individuals sharing a Puerto Rican cultural background to emphasize goals related to proper demeanor (people should be respectful, obedient, appreciative, accepted by the community, and fulfill role expectations) (Gonzalez-Ramos, Zayas, & Cohen, 1998; Harwood, Miller, & Lucca Irizarry, 1995; Harwood et al., 1999).

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| **Socialization goals**  In a study of 32 middle-class Anglo mothers living in Connecticut, and 28 middle-class Puerto Rican mothers living in San Juan, Puerto Rico, mothers were asked to describe the qualities they would and would not like to encourage their children to develop as adults. A cluster analysis of mothers' open-ended responses to these interview questions revealed that 84% of the Anglo mothers were classified into one of two clusters emphasizing Self-Maximization and Self-Control, whereas 67% of the Puerto Rican mothers were classified into one of two clusters emphasizing Proper Demeanor and Decency.  *Qualities contained in clusters of socialization goal responses:*  **Self-Maximization**  happy, secure, self-confident, healthy, intelligent, successful, independent, assertive  **Self Control**  greedy, selfish, spoiled, patient, control emotions, vindictive, aggressive, prejudiced  **Decency**  avoid illegal activities, honest, hardworking, good values, responsible, religious, good citizen  **Proper Demeanor**  respectful, cooperative with authority, obedient, appreciative, liked by others, fulfill family role expectations |
| Chart 1 |

The process of examining personal socialization goals, and then discussing and comparing them with a group of colleagues is extremely enlightening. Rarely are these assumed goals openly discussed, and even more rarely are they analyzed in a manner that facilitates understanding of their inherent potential for enhancing cultural understanding of self and others. During the second cultural training session in our staff development model, the workshop participants generated a few personal long-term socialization goals, and shared the most important ones with the group. Joann and her colleagues were surprised to see that their collective goals were so strongly clustered in the self-maximization category. Only two of these 20 clinicians mentioned primary personal socialization goals in the proper demeanor category. The workshop facilitator explained that results from a current study of middle-class, Anglo mothers from Connecticut and a similar group of Puerto Rican mothers from San Juan would be used for comparative purposes throughout the training (see Chart 1). When the training group responses were compared with those of the middle-class Anglo and island Puerto Rican research participants, they found a close match with the Anglo group (Harwood, Schoelmerich, Schulze, & Gonzalez 1999). One participant noticed that, although the Puerto Rican mothers mentioned proper demeanor goals most frequently, their responses were more balanced overall, with many mothers mentioning goals in nearly all categories. Although the research findings used as an example in this training compare middle-class Puerto Rican and Anglo goals, several participants speculated that Russian, Bosnian, Laotian, and Middle-Eastern immigrant parents in their programs might share a similar focus on goals pertaining to respect and family relationships.

During the ensuing discussion of middle-class Anglo emphasis on individual autonomy to the exclusion of other concerns, Joann observed that the list of goals under self-maximization was a good description of our schools. Most educators and therapists are primarily concerned with maximizing each child's individual competence and independence. An older colleague remarked that these goals were not emphasized so strongly in families and schools during the 1940's and 50's. Other over-40 staff members remembered that obedience, respect and good citizenship were very important at home and in school at that time. Joann wondered if perhaps we could learn from other cultures to balance our strong individualism with more attention to the needs of each other in families and communities. Perhaps the growing movement toward social responsibility curricula in schools nationwide represents an emerging understanding of our need to temper individualism with training in proper demeanor and decency.

*Joann realized that she would need to understand Rosa's individual socialization goals in order to establish a more respectful, collaborative working relationship. Using strategies discussed in the staff training, Joann began to explore cultural goals with Rosa on her next visit.*

**Joann:** *Rosa, I think it would be very helpful for me to understand more about what kinds of things are most important to you in raising your children. Would you mind talking for a few minutes about what you would like your children to be like when they are adults?*   
**Rosa:** *Sure, I'd like my children to be well-behaved, respectful, good people who believe in God. I want them to be connected to me, to learn a lot from me. I want to have something very special with them, so that I can bring them up well, so that they will be good to their families, leaders for the next generation.*   
**Joann:** *So respect, faith and a strong connection to the family are very important to you.*   
**Rosa:** *Yes, children need to learn to be obedient, studious, and grow up to be hard working. It's also important for children to be gentle, loving with others and attached to their family. My parents raised me to be affectionate and grateful and I work to pass that along to my children also.*   
**Joann:** *You know, that's a very good point. I think maybe we're so busy teaching our children to be independent and self-confident that we don't spend enough time helping our children to understand the importance of respect and family relationships. Teaching children loving and respectful behaviors so that others will like them is certainly important for their futures. I really appreciate your willingness to share your goals with me. I think it will help us to work together in finding better ways to encourage Maria's development.*

*Joann felt a sense of accomplishment instead of frustration at the end of this visit. As she shared the conversation about childrearing goals with her director, she felt both proud and excited by this initial success with cultural exploration.*

**Social networks and developmental expectations**

The next staff development session continued to build self-awareness of cultural assumptions by exploring the ways in which individuals construct social networks and understand developmental expectations. As staff members wrote lists of weekly activities and social contacts outside the immediate family for their own "hypothetical toddlers," the training leader encouraged them to consider the number and frequency of contacts with relatives as well as non-family members. Most participants listed several weekly toddler group activities such as playgroups, library story hours, gymboree, or mom -and-tot swimming classes. The majority of these hypothetical toddlers had between zero and two contacts with relatives in the course of a typical week. When asked how these social networks were consistent with their socialization goals, staff members readily pointed out that a variety of social contacts and activities will help toddlers become self-confident, assertive, and independent.

*Joann suggested that maybe the reason that Rosa does not attend Birth to Three parent-child playgroups is that these activities do not support her socialization goals. Other participants agreed with Joann and offered confirmation that some Latino families do not seem to be interested in playgroups. The leader congratulated Joann on her insight and offered research results in support of her observation. Children whose parents emphasize goals relating to the self are more likely to experience contacts with a larger number of individuals on a regular basis, and to experience fewer contacts with relatives, even when relatives live nearby. Children whose parents emphasize goals related to proper demeanor and interdependence are likely to have more frequent contact with a smaller number of individuals, and more frequent contacts with extended family members (Miller & Harwood, 1999)*

*Joann made a mental note to ask Rosa about her interest in meeting with other parents of children with special needs. Perhaps she would like to share a joint home visit with one other family or attend a small parents-only group. She also planned to let Rosa know that she is welcome to invite any extended family members to participate in home visits, planning meetings, parent groups, or any other Birth to Three activities. And in the future, Joann would be careful to inform families about playgroups without pressuring them to attend.*

The group's exploration of developmental expectations began with participants looking at a list of early developmental skills (wave bye-bye, be toilet trained during the day, say first word, etc.) and discussing the expected age of attainment for each. Even though participants were all working as early childhood educators and therapists, a surprising level of disagreement surrounded several milestones. One participant had toilet-trained her children between 18 and 24 months, and reported that they are now happy, well-adjusted high school honor students. Others felt strongly that early toilet training was not acceptable. Responses to the age at which infants/toddlers are able to enjoy other children ranged from 9 to 24 months. Group consensus was reached on only 2 or 3 of the milestones.

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| Mean Age Expectations in Months for Milestone Attainment   |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | Anglo | Puerto  Rican | Filipino | p | | Eat Solid Food | 8.2 | 10.1 | 6.7 | *a\*,c* | | Training Cup | 12.0 | 17.1 | 21.9 | *a,b,c* | | Utensils | 17.7 | 26.5 | 32.4 | *a,b,c\** | | Finger Food | 8.9 | 9.4 | 9.5 |  | | Wean | 16.8 | 18.2 | 36.2 | *b,c* | | Sleep by Self | 13.8 | 14.6 | 38.8 | *b,c* | | Sleep all Night | 14.4 | 14.5 | 32.4 | *b,c* | | Choose Clothes | 31.1 | 44.2 | 33.1 | *a,c* | | Dress Self | 38.2 | 44.2 | 39.2 |  | | Play Alone | 25.0 | 24.8 | 12.3 | *b,c* | | Toilet trained/Day | 31.6 | 29.0 | 20.4 | *b,c* | | Toilet trained/Night | 33.2 | 31.8 | 34.2 |  |   *a* = Anglo significantly different from Puerto Rican  *b* = Anglo significantly different from Filipino  *c* = Puerto Rican significantly different from Filipino  Note: Unmarked comparisons, p < .01.\* p < .05. |
| Chart 2 |

This rather heated discussion provided evidence that we all hold our own cultural beliefs in high regard, and tend to react with defensive emotions when they are challenged. This observation changed the group's focus to our tendency to assume that there is one universally "correct" set of ages at which children should attain developmental milestones. In the past, mothers who were judged as lacking in knowledge of this "correct" timetable were thought to be at risk for poor parenting practices and in need of corrective parenting education. Coincidentally, many of the mothers who were found to lack knowledge of the "correct" developmental expectations were members of minority cultural groups. Current research that examines mothers and their infants in the full context of their cultural values and beliefs challenges this assumption of a single, universal, correct set of developmental expectations, instead finding evidence of distinct cultural patterning in the everyday activities of infancy. Mothers whose socialization goals emphasize proper demeanor and appropriate relatedness expect their infants to attain a variety of milestones at a later age than mothers who emphasize self-maximization goals (Schulze, Harwood, Goebel, & Schubert, 1999). (See Chart 2.).

*Joann began thinking about Rosa's insistence on spoon-feeding Maria and decided to ask her about developmental expectations.*

**Joann:** *Rosa, do you feel that it's important for you to feed Maria because it helps her to feel connected to you?*   
**Rosa:** *Well, yes. It's important for a little child to know that her mother will always help her, will always be there to take care of her needs. Maria needs a lot of help, and I'm showing her that she can always trust her family to care for her.*   
**Joann:** *When do you think children in general should be able to feed themselves without help at a family meal?*   
**Rosa:** *When they are ready to eat calmly and properly using a spoon and fork and showing good table manners. Maybe when they are 4 or 5 years old. It depends on the child.*

*Joann understood that even though Rosa's expectations were markedly different from her own, they were consistent with Rosa's cultural beliefs and reflected a meaningful focus on her long-term socialization goals. Joann could also see that these goals and expectations would lead to positive developmental outcomes for a typical child in the context of Rosa's home. Joann also suspected that Rosa's children might have better table manners at kindergarten age than Joann's own children!*

*The pieces of the cultural difference puzzle were beginning to fall into place for Joann and Rosa. Joann's final task involved considering Maria's individual special needs in the context of her home environment. The fact remained that Maria's developmental delays required out-of-the-ordinary adaptations in her environment to facilitate her development. Maria's use of mouthing as an exploration strategy was likely to continue for quite some time. Helping Maria to refine her raking grasp and begin to isolate her index finger would require manipulating small objects, and food would continue to be the only safe option. Joann decided to try negotiating these issues with Rosa, using some of the strategies and concepts discussed during the staff training sessions and her knowledge of Rosa's goals and expectations.*

**Joann:** *Rosa, I think it's very important for us to try to help Maria learn to use her hands and fingers better so that she can learn to pick up small things and play with more complicated toys. I know that feeding her is an important part of your relationship. Can you think of anything small besides food that we could use to teach her this?*   
**Rosa:** *No, Maria puts everything in her mouth. It's not safe to give her anything small, unless it's something that she can eat.*   
**Joann:** *Remember when I gave her crackers in her high chair a few weeks ago? You didn't seem to be very comfortable with that.*   
**Rosa:** *No, I know Maria can't help it, but when she picks them up she smashes and crumbles them. Then the pieces get all stuck on her hands and face and in her hair. I can't stand to see her all messed up like that. She just needs my help to eat crackers and it's important to me to help her.*   
**Joann:** *If we could find something that she could pick up without crumbling it all over, would that be easier for you? How about raisins? She won't crumble them, but she will need to work hard with her hands and fingers to pick them up.*   
**Rosa:** *That's a good idea. I think she likes raisins.*   
**Joann:** *Could you spread about six raisins around on her tray while she is waiting for you to get her food, and let her try to pick them up one at a time by herself?*   
**Rosa:** *Yes, that's a good idea. I'll get some raisins at the store tomorrow. By the time you come next week, maybe she'll be able to pick them up and get them in her mouth by herself! It will be more fun for her when she can use her fingers to play with lots of different toys instead of always using baby things.*

*Needless to say, Joann felt quite triumphant in relating this conversation to her program director. Joann's emerging understanding of culture as a lens through which we interpret events and experiences in our lives had enabled her to overcome the barriers to successful intervention with Maria and her mother.*

**Effective training for culturally sensitive practice**

Finding alternate pathways to developmental competence for children with developmental challenges is the ultimate goal of all early interventionists. Understanding that "developmental competence" is a culturally defined construct is, however, a new experience for many service providers. The staff development model described in the story of Rosa and Joann has been presented to several groups of professionals, including regular and special education early childhood teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as physical, occupational, and speech/language therapists. The programs represented by these staff members serve typical and special needs children from birth through age six in both classroom and home-based settings. At the conclusion of the training sessions, 95 percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I will use the information from this training to change some of the ways in which I work with families."

The two aspects of the training that generated the most responsive interest were the definition and examples of what constitutes culture, and the discussion of long-term socialization goals. Many participants admitted to having always equated culture with ethnicity, and to having used knowledge of group characteristics to make programming assumptions without exploring the cultural beliefs of individual parents and families. During the course of the training, participants came to realize that knowledge of group history and characteristics is valuable, but not sufficient, for culturally sensitive practice. In particular, they appreciated the training emphasis on specific questioning strategies for use in exploring cultural beliefs and values with families, with 95 percent of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, "I will use the information about socialization goal categories and questioning strategies in my work with families."

Teaching early intervention and early care professionals that culturally sensitive practice requires awareness of how personal experiences, beliefs, and values influence their own understanding of development is a necessary first step in our journey toward more inclusive services for infants, toddlers and their families. Teaching service providers to make proactive efforts to gain understanding of each parent's goals and expectations, and to share their own perspectives respectfully, is the next step in this journey. Only after these steps have been taken, and mutually respectful, collaborative relationships with parents established, can service providers begin to successfully negotiate adaptations in parenting and programming practices.

If professionals are not prepared to actively seek the parents' cultural perspectives and share their own, communication will frequently remain unilateral, and the effects of interventions will remain minimal. As Latino, African, and Asian American communities continue to grow in the coming years, the future of our children depends on our understanding of culture and our willingness to engage in personal and professional cultural exploration. As direct service professionals, we must be willing to engage in an active dialogue with cultural researchers -- learning, implementing, and providing feedback to increase our collective effectiveness in including culturally diverse populations in family support and educational programming.

This staff development model represents an effort to bridge the gap between practicing service providers and cultural researchers in anthropology and psychology. The strong, positive reception it has gained in pilot presentations is testimony to the need for and appreciation of such information among current early intervention professionals.

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