

Why should early childhood professionals consider the role of culture? Increasingly, home- and center-based staff and providers work with children and families who come from cultural backgrounds different from their own. Early care and education programs are generally the first settings where children may be away from their families for extended periods of time.

Most families with children have more contact with early childhood professionals than they do with educators once their children enter elementary school and start moving up the grades. This first contact is especially important because it helps form families' attitudes toward school, educators, and other child-serving professionals. Thus, the early childhood years provide caregivers and early educators an opportunity to make a positive impact not only on children's adjustment to outside care and education but also on long-term relationships between families and professionals.

Bridging Cultures IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Early childhood is a critical time to begin establishing common ground between teachers (including infant-toddler caregivers and other professionals) and the children and families they serve.

AN ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Bridging Cultures in Early Care and Education: A Training Module introduces how early childhood educators can use the organizing concepts of *individualism* and *collectivism* as a means of understanding cultural differences between themselves and the families they serve. These concepts have been shown to be accessible and highly useful in improving home-school understanding across cultures.

The framework describes the value systems of cultures in a nonjudgmental way. This makes it a safe way to begin learning about cultures — one's own as well as those of others.

Culture has many different definitions, but a simple one used in the Bridging Cultures in Early Care and Education (BC-ECE) module is “a set of values, beliefs and ways of thinking about the world that influences everyday behavior” (Trumbull & Farr, 2005). Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next in multiple ways, both explicitly — in conversations and direct guidance — and implicitly — in daily practices such as child-rearing. It is when disparities in the values and belief systems of different individuals become evident that culture comes into focus.

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This article is an excerpt from *Bridging Cultures in Early Care and Education: A Training Module*, a resource to help pre-service and in-service early childhood educators, including infant-toddler caregivers, understand the role of culture in their programs and in their interactions with parents. Developed with the support of WestEd, the A. L. Mailman Foundation, and the Foundation for Child Development, the training guide is published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and due to be released in early 2006. The authors — Marlene Zepeda, Janet Gonzalez-Mena, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, and Elise Trumbull — caution that the cultural framework described here is a tool for understanding fundamental cultural differences but should not be used to oversimplify cultures or to categorize individuals.

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BC-ECE training helps teachers and child care providers become “cultural bridges” between children and families and early care and education settings.

The framework’s two basic concepts — *individualism* and *collectivism* — are used to illustrate how cultural beliefs and values shape attitudes and behaviors. Each orientation is associated with a different set of cultural priorities that, among other things, guide how members of a culture rear and educate their children. Focusing on this distinction is not the only way to think about cultural differences, but it has proven to be extremely useful for understanding many instances of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

INDIVIDUALISM

Individualism stresses independence and individual achievement, focusing on the needs of the individual, self-expression, and personal choice. It emphasizes the “object” world, particularly with respect to the concept of private property and the idea that objects are a source

feeding, dressing), and use “their words” to identify their needs. All of these examples are signs that individualism is valued.

COLLECTIVISM

While the culture of the United States as a whole values and encourages individuals’ independence, most of the world’s cultures tend to focus on the *interdependence* of groups and individuals, reflecting the cultural value of “collectivism.” According to cross-cultural experts, a collectivistic value orientation is found in 70 percent of the world’s cultures (Triandis, 1989).

Collectivism emphasizes social responsibility and the priority of group needs over individual needs. It stresses respect for authority and obligation to group norms. In collectivistic cultures, possessions are often shared, with objects being important in the context of human relationships, not in and of themselves. For instance, a toy or household object may be used as a source of interaction between a mother and child, but the child

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of learning about the physical world. When a preschool, infant program, or family child care home operates primarily from an individualistic perspective, children are treated as unique and special individuals who need the opportunity to explore objects in their surroundings and to learn to become independent.

The physical environment is also likely to reflect this perspective, with children having their own cubbies, lockers, or coat hooks identified as “theirs” and their names and pictures prominently displayed. It is also likely that parents are asked to put nametags on their child’s clothing. Children are encouraged to take care of their property, take care of themselves (e.g., toileting,

is not likely to be directed to play with it or investigate it independently. In this example, the object is viewed as a tool for emphasizing the relationship between the mother and the child, one based on interdependence, helping, and sharing. In collectivistic cultures, there is also a strong emphasis on the family as a unit, not on each individual member per se.

When a preschool, infant program, or family child care home emphasizes sharing and downplays the individual and his or her personal accomplishments in favor of the achievements of the group, it is exhibiting collectivistic values. Collectivistic practices that can be seen in early care and education settings include potluck meals as a means of sharing across many families, favoring

large-group size for activities over small-group or individual interaction, and mixed-aged grouping where older children help and assist the younger children.

WE CAN BUILD CULTURAL BRIDGES

Is it possible to reconcile the differences between collectivism and individualism? Can early childhood educators create links between those who are clearly collectivistic and those who are not? Can collectivistic families and children be made to feel at home in an individualistic environment and vice versa?

The Bridging Cultures project is predicated on the belief that the answer to all of these questions is yes. In fact, many early childhood care and education settings already reflect a good balance between collectivism and individualism. But they are rarer than they should be. BC-ECE training is designed to help participants develop an appreciation for the contrasting patterns of care and education reflected in individualistic and collectivistic value orientations, to understand that these values need not be mutually exclusive, and to explore how best to bridge and blend these two perspectives in early childhood and related settings.

Trumbull, E. & Farr, B. (2005). *Language and Learning: What Teachers Need to Know*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Triandis, H. C. (1989). *Cross-cultural studies of individualism and collectivism*. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 37, 43-133.

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supporting and nurturing the healthy caregiver-child relationship to provide the foundation for social and emotional well-being,” says Reynolds.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Both centers are guided by research on early childhood development and early intervention, such as a notable study by the National Research Council and the National Academies’ Institute of Medicine that includes the following findings:

- “Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience....
- The growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behavior....
- Children are active participants in their own development, reflecting the intrinsic human drive to explore and master one’s environment....
- Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy human development....”¹

Lally points out that such findings carry significant implications for those designing and implementing early childhood programs. For example, he notes that babies have an “inborn capacity and inclination” to learn particular things. So, infant learning “is more heavily influenced by the child’s internal agenda” than by external stimuli, he says.

Likewise, consider the strong connection between how infants and toddlers feel and how well they learn. “In the early years, safety, survival, and security are crucial,” says Lally. “That means that before they can attend to intellectual pursuits, children need to link to people they trust and feel relaxed around.”

Reynolds agrees. “When a caring adult provides encouragement to infants and toddlers in their initial attempts to explore their environment, young

¹ Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (eds.). (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

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