



CULTURAL COMPETENCY

HONOURING CHILDREN'S CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC RIGHTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

By Jade Fraser and Catharine Hydon

Jade Fraser, fka children's services and early childhood expert Catharine Hydon, presented a popular session on Cultural Competency at the 2015 Early Childhood Education Conference, Together we grow. This article shares some insights from the presentation.

"Respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families."
(EYLF, DEEWR, 2009, p.13)

Culturally competent practices are central to our capacity to meet the needs and best interests of young children. While most early childhood educators agree that they

respect children's rights and value cultural diversity, the reality is that our actions too often remain superficial. We are sometimes reluctant to engage in the politics of diversity, preferring to steer clear of the courageous conversations of rights and honouring difference. Educators, children and families using our early childhood services continue to receive the message that their home language and culture, and therefore their identity and sense of belonging, is not fully valued. How do families and children know that we value their identity unless we are explicit in our reflection of this value?

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNHCR 1989), Australia has agreed to be internationally accountable for ensuring that children have every opportunity to exercise their rights as set out by the Convention. Article 31 of the Convention specifically addresses children's cultural and linguistic rights and affirms that "Children have the right to learn and use the language and customs of their families, whether or not these are shared by the majority of the people in the country where they live" (UNICEF 1996). Educators play a crucial role in enacting these rights. Through critical reflection, educators are invited to consider how to provide opportunities for these rights to be realised. This becomes particularly challenging when our language and cultural experiences are very different to those of the children and families accessing our services.

The definition of cultural competency outlined in the EYLF provides a starting point to addressing questions of practice.

Cultural competency is 'much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with,

and effectively interact with people across cultures' (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009, p.16).

Cultural competency is a lens applied to our thoughts and actions when we work with children and families. It is referred to as a journey or continuum because there is no end to culturally competent practices and understandings. Therefore, cultural competence is about the ability to be responsive to culture and competently work with children and families from all cultural backgrounds. When we make intentional efforts to develop respectful and supportive relationships we send powerful messages of respect, we begin to understand and value the influence that culture has on experiences, perspectives, expectations and practices. These efforts enhance our ability to support a child's identity, sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Another important beginning step towards cultural competence is to reflect on your own world view and how it has been influenced by the cultural values implicit in your life. Educators who identify the cultural influences that shape their own experiences and perspectives are able to recognise the impact of culture

on others. This understanding can assist early childhood services to embed cultural perspectives throughout their programs and relationships in order to create a culturally rich and safe environment for all children and families.

Another important action to consider is the way we support children's first or home language.

"Children's use of their home languages underpins their sense of identity and their conceptual development. Children feel a sense of *belonging* when their language, interaction styles and ways of communication are valued. They have the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English." (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009, p. 38)

Of course learning English is an important and necessary skill for living in Australia, however the learning of an additional language should never be at the expense of the first or home language. There is sometimes a misconception that children in the process of learning English as an additional language might be delayed in their learning – in fact, maintaining first

language supports and enhances learning. Early childhood educators and services have a vital role in supporting children and families to maintain their languages, identity and wellbeing while also learning a new language.

Cultural competency is about everyday practicalities as much as big concepts and principles. Educators create culturally supportive programs and environments when they work collaboratively with families to include elements of family life into the service. Familiar items from children's homes, celebrations that recognise the important times in families lives and routines that respond to children's everyday lives are just a few of the ordinary ways we can make cultural competence real.

Respecting the cultural and linguistic identity of the children and families we work with is a sign of our ethical and professional practice. At its best, it contributes to the wellbeing of whole communities and ensures that Australia nurtures its diversity now and into the future.

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