

Promoting Cultural Understanding and Developing Cultural Competence

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Individuals learn to respect people from other cultures and to work effectively with others from different backgrounds.

What is cultural competence and how do you develop it?

The development of cultural competence is a long-term and life-long process. Cultural competence is a combination of skills, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and behaviors that allows one to successfully interact with, and respect people from different cultural backgrounds. To "develop cultural competence," one must grow and develop in each of these areas. (Note: The following section is adapted from Advocates for Youth, 2004, referenced on the following page.)

Knowledge

- Developing cultural competence entails learning about your own culture and understanding the role that it plays in your life. Understand how it has shaped you and how it continues to influence various aspects of your life today. Be aware of how it influences the way you view and judge things.
- While it might be impossible to learn everything about all the other cultures in the world, it is still important to gain knowledge about other cultures, particularly if you are interacting with specific groups. Read about other cultures and history, participate in cultural events, and interact with people of different backgrounds.
- It is important to acknowledge that some cultural groups have been disadvantaged over time on the basis of their color, culture, and/or ethnicity. It is important to understand how the power structures in societies today

Introduction

The ethnic composition of the United States is rapidly shifting. It is projected that by the year 2050, close to 50% of the U.S. population will be comprised of individuals from various racial and ethnic minority groups. Nonetheless, despite the increasing diversity in many communities, bias, prejudice, and racism still pervade our society. For this reason, more and more people are recognizing the need for individuals to gain the skills necessary to work and interact with people from various cultural backgrounds.

What is culture?

Culture is an extremely difficult concept to define. Social scientists have more than 100 definitions for the term, and they are nowhere close to reaching a consensus. While there is no commonly accepted definition, most agree that culture has to do with a *shared* set of beliefs, practices, and values that often result from shared experience or heritage; and that is passed on from parents to their children.

Culture influences almost all aspects of our lives, and we often do not even realize the power that it plays in our everyday functioning. Culture enhances our lives. It brings wonderful traditions, informs our beliefs about the world, and structures the ways in which we act. Cultural diversity also makes the world a very interesting place. Unfortunately, culture has also been (and still is) used by some in a very negative manner. Throughout history, culture has been used by some to oppress other groups, to look down on others, and to form preconceived and often negative notions (i.e., stereotypes) regarding various cultures. As such, it is essential that



are still slanted towards some groups and against others.

Beliefs/Attitudes

- It is impossible to live in the world without forming biases. However, it is important to be aware of them, and to do something about them. Think about your biases, prejudices, and beliefs. What comes to mind when you think of particular culture groups? What first comes to mind when you meet people of a particular race? Are these beliefs stereotypes or are they based on fact?

Skills/Behaviors

- Cultural competence entails concrete behaviors. Be aware of your actions and

Recommended Resources

- 1) *Enhancing cultural competence in out-of-school time programs: What is it, and why is it important?* 2007. By E.K. Kennedy, J. Bronte-Tinkew, & G. Matthews. Practitioner Insights: Research-to-Results. Available for download at: http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_01_31_RB_CultureComp.pdf
- 2) *Culture and Parenting: A Guide for Delivering Parenting Curriculums to Diverse Families.* By L. L. Ontai and A. M. Mastergeorge. University of California-Davis. Available for download at: <http://groups.ucanr.org/kids/>
- 3) *A Youth Leader's Guide to Building Cultural Competence.* 1994. By Advocates for Youth. Available for download at: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/guide/>
- 4) *A Class Divided.* This program, aired on PBS for the program *Frontline*, illustrates Jane Elliott's ground breaking and award winning work on discrimination. While teaching a third-grade class in Iowa, Elliott provided her students first-hand experience on discrimination. Her work has been referenced for decades in college courses in sociology, education, psychology, and many other disciplines. It is available to view for free at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/view.html>
- 5) *101 Ways to Combat Prejudice: Developing a Common Language.* This publication is a joint project between the Barnes & Noble Co. and the Anti-Defamation League. It is a free booklet that gives concrete action steps, and is available for free download at: http://www.adl.org/prejudice/prejudice_terms.asp

Final thoughts

As mentioned earlier, developing cultural competence is a long-term and life-long process. The goal of this presentation is to start you off on this path toward growth and development. This program gives you the preliminary tools to begin this process and the next steps are up to you.

- whether you express bias and prejudice. Do you avoid interactions with people of other groups? Does your speech express prejudice?
- Stand up for people of other groups. Be an advocate. Educate others regarding cultural issues. Provide your students with opportunities to interact with and learn about other cultures.