

# Do You Have Cultural Tunnel Vision?

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

We have America in our hands. As child care providers, we are raising greater numbers of America's children and our influence is more significant than anyone likes to admit. Five days a week, seven or eight hours a day - we have them during prime time.

So we have a responsibility to these children in our care to insure that they become culturally competent and empowered. Each child should have the opportunity to grow up to be a full member of his or her own culture. In addition, all children - whether or not they are members of the white European-based American culture - should become empowered in the mainstream culture. Those for whom this so called dominant culture is a second culture should be able to gain their power without having to give up their own culture. All children should be brought up to continue to fit in with their own people.

The goal in a culturally diverse child care setting should be to produce bicultural people. When we fail at our task, some children go right into the mainstream and reject their family's culture. Other children splash around at the edges unable to swim in any stream at all. These children end up as marginal people who don't fit anywhere. When we succeed, the children are at home in several currents - able to function comfortably and competently in more than one culture.

It is a big order to expect child care programs to produce bicultural people - especially considering that we all have blind spots that keep us from even seeing many aspects of culture. The ultimate blind spot is tunnel vision. A friend of mine who has tunnel vision explains it like this: "What I can't see at the sides is just like what you can't see at the back of your head. There is no blackness to define the edges. I have no clues that something is missing."

We all have tunnel vision, or at least blind spots, when it comes to equity and to cultural issues. We don't see everything there is to see, and we don't even realize what we aren't seeing. Sometimes children arrive in our programs to find a culturally assaultive environment, and we don't even realize it.

What do I mean by culture? I'm not talking about Chinese New Year, "Christmas around the world," interesting ethnic foods, or costumes. I'm talking about what feels normal - feels right. I'm not even talking about language, though, of course, language and culture are closely tied together. Culture also includes the nonverbal aspect of everything we do, and all the messages that we send which reflect our values, our perspective, our view of the world and what's true, what's good and what's right.

All this translates into actions and behaviors as teachers work with the children in their care and communicate with the parents about what they are doing and why.

Take babies for example. As we care for these youngest children, we carry on behavioral dialogues with them. Such actions as holding, feeding, diapering are behavioral dialogues. For the child in care who is of the same culture as the caregiver, the dialogue is more likely to feel normal, right. But for children whose culture is different from the caregiver, the dialogue may be in a foreign language.

We need to learn to speak all children's behavioral languages and teach them ours. We can do that if we not only observe the child closely but also learn from the parents about the differences in how they hold, feed, diaper. In order to truly understand, we also need to know what parents want for their babies, their ideas of the meaning of their babies' behavior, their expectations for their children.

Let's look at eye contact patterns as a sample of one cultural aspect of the holding, feeding, diapering dialogue. We teach those patterns without even realizing it. Establishing eye contact is considered essential to the attachment process in the dominant culture. Parents and teachers are told of the importance of eye contact. This way of relating to children by looking them in the eye, and expecting them to look back, is thought to be universal by mainstream America. The preschool teacher gets down at the child's level and talks directly. He or she is teaching eye contact patterns. He or she believes that looking at someone when you are listening to them shows you are paying attention.

Well, that's a blind spot in people who believe their eye contact patterns are the right ones. Consider the difference in the right way to relate to a child who belongs to a culture in which respect is shown through not looking an adult in the eye. The early lessons in eye contact patterns are different.

Consider another difference in cultural patterns that can affect a child in care. The mainstream way is to provide each person, no matter how young, a bed of his or her own (except for couples). This value starts early - in infancy - as each individual is considered to have the need for private space.

The word individual is downplayed in some cultures, and the word private is practically nonexistent. Some people in these cultures have only negative connotations associated with the word alone. They equate being alone with being lonely. Sleeping in a separate bed is not the norm, no matter what age.

When a child arrives in child care and is expected to put himself or herself to sleep in a crib or cot alone, this child may have a very hard time. The sleeping dialogue is in a foreign language.

It's important for us to recognize the cultural differences, rather than to lump everyone together in the old melting pot way. Some people go out of their way to emphasize similarities and de-emphasize differences. They claim to be color blind, or culture blind.

My husband, who was born and raised in Mexico, is often told by well-meaning people who wish to compliment him that they never think of him as being Mexican. Since I'm not Mexican, I don't know what that feels like, but I do know how I would react if some well-meaning person told me in a complimentary way that he or she never thinks of me as being a woman. That would shock me, because being female is a vital part of who I am, and I don't want to be considered genderless. I don't want anyone to hold my gender against me, or treat me unequally, but I don't want a vital part of my identity ignored either.

So what is a director to do when faced with a program in which staff and children come from a variety of cultures? How can one move beyond celebrating "Christmas around the world" to looking more deeply at issues of culture and equity?

It's a matter of communication, sensitivity, and openness. Human beings have a great potential for learning. A multi-ethnic population in a child care center provides wonderful opportunities for enhanced understanding of diverse ways of looking at the world, and ways of behaving. We can learn by being observant, discussing differences, asking questions, and learning problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

And if your program population doesn't happen to include cultural diversity, you can practice the same skills by tuning in on and celebrating individual differences. I've never seen a program that didn't have plenty of them!

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