

# *Diversity in Early Care and Education*

HONORING DIFFERENCES

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Fifth Edition

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Perceiving and Responding to Differences*

As a white, middle-class American with mostly Anglo-Saxon and Celtic heritage (my Spanish surname comes from my husband), I was surprised to discover that I have a culture. I, like everyone else, move within a cultural framework every minute of every day. That framework is influenced by and includes what are called attributes of culture, some of which I am extremely conscious of, but some of which I am barely aware of. My life is influenced by my:

- race,
- gender,
- age,
- abilities and disabilities,
- language,
- social class, including status and economic level,
- ethnicity and national origin,
- religion and/or spiritual practice,
- original geographic location of my family, where I grew up, and present location (if different), and
- sexuality, including sexual orientation.

My framework influences the way I think and act and how I perceive, handle, and interact with people and materials. It determines my notions of time and space and even influences my behaviors related to those notions.<sup>1</sup>

## CULTURE IS UNCONSCIOUS

I move within this cultural framework as unconsciously as I move within the physical world I live in. I don't think about putting one foot in front of the other when I walk. I don't think about my culturally determined actions, postures, or ways of dealing with people—they're automatic.

When I meet someone who obviously doesn't move in the same cultural framework that I do, I'm jarred. Because my way seems right, even normal, I tend to judge others based on my own perspective. I may consider them exotic or interesting, or I may consider them weird. But being a polite person who tries to get along with people, I do what I can not to notice. Because my way is normal to me, it seems rude to make an issue of the fact that someone else is "not normal." And because I have a whole society behind me giving me the message that "my people" are the standard by which everyone else is judged, I can afford to keep on ignoring what I choose to.

### *A Narrow View*

But can I? What does this attitude do to me? It shields me from reality. It gives me a slanted perspective, a narrow view. I miss out on a lot because of my perspective. Besides, it gives me a false impression of importance, letting me believe that "my people" are the only ones who count in the world, when, in reality, white, middle-class Anglo-Americans like me are a small minority of the world population.

What does it do to those who are not "my people" if I continue in this narrow, slanted perspective, ignoring what I consider "not normal"? I train teachers and educate parents; therefore, I have a lot of influence over the next generation. Imagine the harm I can do both to "my people" and to those whose differences I ignore when I carry out my job with this biased attitude. Imagine what my students can do to the children they live and work with when they define "normality" in the narrow ways they learn from me. What does it do to people who are different from me to have those differences defined as abnormal? What does it do to people who are different from me to have those differences ignored?

### *What Are the Effects of Being Ignored?*

That's an important question: What does it do to someone to ignore some integral aspect of his or her identity?

My husband was born and raised in Mexico. Every now and then someone says to him, "I never think of you as being Mexican." They mean this as a compliment. Because I'm not Mexican, I don't know how this feels. But I can

imagine how I would feel if someone complimented me by saying he never thinks of me as 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 stereotype me because I'm female. I don't want anyone to hold my gender against me or treat me unequally either, but I would feel very strange if someone made a point of ignoring a vital part of my identity.

Of course, identity includes more than gender and where a person comes from. I may not be thinking of my race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and age, unless I experience being a target of oppression because of one or more of those cultural attributes. I'm probably not thinking of how all those parts of my identity are defined by culture. I may not even consider how my culture and the culture of the group in power are related. But my identity formation isn't the same as everyone else's. Everyone needs to become increasingly aware that when aspects of a person's identity make him or her a target of oppression, ignoring that aspect doesn't make oppression go away. That person is a target of oppression because of one or more of those cultural attributes.

Gay and lesbian parents may experience uncomfortable feelings when they enroll their children in early care and education programs and find themselves the target of one or more person's biased attitudes. This is an unfortunate situation for all concerned, but let's focus for a moment on the children of gay and lesbian parents. How do they feel when they get the message, spoken or unspoken, that something is wrong with their family? A basic tenet widely agreed upon in the field of early care and education is that all children need to feel that their families are acceptable to their teachers. That means they must not get the impression that their family is not normal. Also, they need to see their families reflected in materials throughout the program, and they need to be able to talk about their families and hear about families like theirs. When gay or lesbian parents enroll their children in early care and education programs it is vital that they are greeted with the same attention and respect afforded every other family. No matter what the staff's political or religious views are about marriage and families, the ethics of early childhood are clear as stated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct.<sup>2</sup> Principle 1 of the Position Statement reads: Above all, we shall not harm children." (P-1.1).

Other pertinent ethical statements from the NAEYC are included under Section II—Ethical Responsibilities to Families. Among others, the ideals are to:

- Develop relationships of mutual trust and create partnerships with families served. (I-2.2)
- Welcome all family members and encourage them to participate in the program. (I-2.3)

 POINT TO PONDER 1.1*What's Normal?*

What's normal? Defining "normal" involves comparing people. For some cultures, comparing individuals is inappropriate, so they never think in those terms. In the field of special education, using the term "normal" brings up its opposite—"abnormal." For a child to grow up being labeled "abnormal" can have a negative effect on his or her identity, unless someone has managed to give the term positive associations.


- To respect the dignity and preferences of each family and to make an effort to learn about its structure, culture, language, customs, and beliefs. (I-2.5)

One of the purposes of this book is to promote equity and stand up against oppression. People can do that by broadening their views. Part of broadening one's view includes exploring notions of what's considered "normal." The term is often used to mean what is typical, regular, or natural without reference to any normalizing procedure. The official definition used by human development experts relates to norms that come from research on some particular group of people. Knowing that definition of normal should bring up some questions, such as: What group? Under what circumstances and in what environment? Who were the researchers? Were they of the same language, culture, socio-economic background, race, and religious group as the subjects? Were they the same gender? How many people were in the sample? See *Point to Ponder* 1.1 for more questions about defining people by using the word *normal*.

Some years ago when women looked at norms in the medical field, they created a movement toward defining *women's* health issues and questioning the existing medical standards that, at the time, came from studying mostly men. Just as women's health was looked at from the view of male research, much classic child development research came from university laboratory schools, which had a preponderance of children from white, middle-class, educated families. See *Point to Ponder* 1.2 for something more to ponder about the subject of norms and research in the child development field.

*Broadening the View*

We each need to look inside and discover how often we define people and their behaviors as normal by our own standards. I, for one, am working to


 POINT TO PONDER 1.2
*The Five Percent Phenomenon*

Child development books are sprinkled with diversity these days, yet most authors don't point out that historical research was done by Europeans on Europeans and that today, the field is heavily influenced by the United States. According to Helen Penn and Peter Moss in a paper called "The Five Percent Phenomenon" the research reported in most child development texts represents only 5 percent of the world's children, yet the implications of this research are considered universally applicable. Think about how few people in the field of child development know much about 95 percent of the world's children, many of them who live today in the United States of America.

*Source:* Penn, H. and Moss, P. (1998) Monograph, "The Five Percent Phenomenon."

raise my awareness so I can broaden my own perspective of what's normal and quit applying a single standard for adaptive, healthy, and competent behaviors. I have a strong desire to quit ignoring differences and begin not only to notice them but also to celebrate them. I want to look at differences as sources of strength, not abnormalities or weaknesses. I don't expect to change all at once—in fact, I've been working on this shift of perspective for a number of years. Revising one's views can be a slow process.

## CULTURAL PLURALISM

In less personal terms, the ideology on which this book is based is *cultural pluralism*. Cultural pluralism is the notion that groups and individuals should be allowed, even encouraged, to hold on to what gives them their unique identities while maintaining their membership in the larger social framework. Mutual respect is the goal, though it isn't easy because, at least in the human development/education fields, we've been taught a deficit model where intellectual, family, and mental health practices that differ from the mainstream, middle-class norm are not viewed as cultural differences but as defects or inadequacies. Similarly viewed were behaviors that are competent and adaptive responses to a history of bias and misunderstanding in a society that has always had first- and second-class citizens. We have all been subjected to a good number of misunderstandings in the past. This book is an attempt to correct some of them.

A further word about cultural pluralism: It's important to understand that I am not advocating separatism. We live in this land together and we need to get along. We each can't remain behind our own closed doors as individuals


**POINT TO PONDER 1.3**
*Should We Be a Melting Pot or a Tossed Salad?*

Think about a tossed salad. If you combine several kinds of lettuce and various other ingredients like onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, mushrooms, red bell peppers, and artichoke hearts, you have a delicious dish. Each ingredient retains its identity—texture, color, flavor—and those all contribute to the unity of the whole salad. Now imagine putting that salad into a blender and pushing the liquify button so that the ingredients become one. I've done it. All the uniqueness disappears and what remains is a slimy green or gray mess, depending on the ingredients of the salad. I didn't have the guts to taste it! That's the difference between the goal of unity as uniformity compared with unity through diversity!

Gandhi said:

*"Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilization."*

or as groups. We can't automatically place individuals with differing abilities into separate programs or institutions. The point of cultural pluralism is to promote diversity. The goal of diversity is unity. Only when we can come together freely, as we are, feeling good about who we are, can we create a healthy unity among all the people of this great society. It may seem as though unity and diversity are opposites. One of the themes of this book is to look closer at opposites and see how they are really two halves of a whole. It isn't unity versus diversity. That's only the case if you define unity as uniformity. I don't! My goal is unity *through* diversity. See *Point to Ponder 1.3* for a metaphoric example of what happens when you create unity by *blending* instead of *mixing* diverse elements.

### *Cultural Pluralism and Early Care and Education Programs*

You can't remove from your cultural framework the ways you relate to children and guide their behavior, plan a curriculum, set up the environment, handle caregiving routines, and carry out parent education. Your behaviors are determined by your values, which are cultural, familial, and individual. They are also determined by what you consider normal, which can be influenced by your race, ability, social status, income, sexual orientation, religion, age, and/or the messages you've been given about yourself in regard to these aspects of your background and identity.

To aim for cultural pluralism in an early care and education program, you must have a clear understanding of differences. You must see where child and


 POINT TO PONDER 1.4
*Becoming Aware of "Images of the Child"*

Although I'm using the term "needs," I hope you don't get a picture in your mind of needy children. The images that we have are powerful, and thinking of needy children is a little like thinking of developmentally disabled children or crippled children. There is a movement in early care and education to put the child first before the descriptor or label to emphasize humanity. A child should never become a label. In other words, a child may be physically challenged, but that doesn't mean he or she is a crippled child. Children have needs or a developmental disability. It's not a matter of being politically correct, it's a matter of the images we carry in our heads based on the terms we use. Those images influence our attitudes and thus our behavior.

teacher behavior fail to mesh so that you can make adjustments. You must know and respond to the parents' goals, values, and beliefs related to the care and education of their children. You must know how to meet their needs in culturally appropriate ways.

It may seem that cultural differences have little to do with the nitty-gritty of meeting children's needs. After all, how many different ways can there be to feed, clean, carry, dress, and touch children and provide for rest and warmth? Where do the cultural differences come in?

The differences show up in *the way* the needs are met—in how teachers and caregivers interact and relate to children, in the issue of body language and nonverbal communication. Culture is learned very early, and early childhood theoreticians and practitioners can't afford to ignore this fact. The term "needs" appears three times in the three preceding paragraphs. Look at *Point to Ponder 1.4* and consider the terminology and the difference between children who have needs and "needy children."

*Babies Are Raised to Be Members of Their Cultures*

Look at an example of how differently two cultures relate to their babies. The difference reflects what the adults in each culture believe is good for babies, which in turn reflects their varying value systems. Here's the example. In a classic piece of research, when comparing three- to four-month-old infants in middle-class homes in Japan and America, Caudill and Frost found that American mothers (they mean white, European-American mothers) talked to their babies more, and Japanese mothers spent a good deal of time lulling and soothing their babies. The Americans were stimulating their babies. The Japanese were doing the opposite.<sup>3</sup>



So what? What does it matter if some parents spend more time stimulating their babies and others spend more time calming them? It matters a lot because how the adults treat babies affects those babies' behavior and personality development.

As Caudill and Frost found, the result of the differential treatment was that the American babies were more physically and vocally active, and the Japanese babies were less so. Caudill and Frost concluded, "Thus, because of the different styles of caretaking in the two cultures, it appears that by three to four months of age infants have already learned (or have been conditioned) to behave in culturally distinctive ways and that this has happened outside awareness and well before the development of language" (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> In other words, the European-American mothers were making their babies into the kinds of people who would fit their culture, and the Japanese mothers were doing the same.

Think about what might happen if the babies were handled some of the time by European-American mothers and some of the time by Japanese mothers. They might turn out to be bicultural people, compartmentalizing their differential treatment. Children do that—they know they are treated one way by this person in this setting and another way by another person in another setting. However, instead of becoming bicultural, they might become confused about how they are supposed to be. If this is the case, the environment with the "foreign mother" might be called culturally assaultive.

Babies and young children become acculturated to the distinct individual and cultural rhythms of their teachers and caregivers. They learn synchrony that in some cases seems to be culturally specific. Cultural differences are real but so is stereotyping. Read the caution in *Point to Ponder* 1.5, which says that just because you know a person's culture doesn't mean you can predict his or her behavior.

Barbara Rogoff, in her book *Apprenticeship in Thinking*, writes about "guided participation." She notes that children pick up important learnings from adults, even if there are no lessons or conscious efforts to teach. She makes a good case for much of learning happening early and being culturally specific. One example she gives from the research of Michaels and Cazden has to do with differences in the way young white children and young black children tell stories. The two styles are distinct and, interestingly enough, though white adults see the white style as superior, black adults find the other style more interesting and effective. As a result of these differing opinions, white teachers at sharing time tend to interrupt the black children and, instead of helping them, actually hinder their storytelling.<sup>5</sup> Difference is deficiency in their minds. We must avoid leaving children with the impression that they are wrong when they do what they have learned at home, and instead accept them as they are. Acceptance doesn't preclude teaching them other ways of doing



## POINT TO PONDER 1.5

### *Predicting Behavior*

When you read about mothers in Japan, was it similar to any ideas you already had about Japanese people or about Asian people in general? The danger of labeling cultural differences and relating them to a specific culture is in feeding preexisting stereotypes. If you think of Japanese people as calm, quiet, and passive, and you meet a Japanese mother who is outspoken and who stirs her baby up by bouncing and jiggling, what would you do with that new piece of information that didn't fit your preconception? Many people, instead of recognizing that they are stereotyping someone, would maintain their stereotype and just classify the person who doesn't fit it as "different." The next time they meet a Japanese mother, they will still have the same expectations of what this person will be like. If there is one message I want you to take away from this book, it is this: Knowing a person's culture doesn't mean you can predict their behavior.

things. That teaching should be done so that it adds to their skills and doesn't take anything away from them.

Rogoff's concern (and mine) is that children who are grounded in one system and are attempting to function in another experience numerous difficulties. The ideal is that children benefit from learning new cultural systems and still keep their home culture. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. More often, the dominant culture competes with the home culture and the home culture loses. This happens especially when the program's goal (whether conscious or unconscious) is to eradicate the home culture. When children encounter such "subtractive processes," they fail to grow up with bicultural skills and identities. Huge identity issues arise when children grow older and become disconnected from their families. The beginnings of losing home culture can start early, even in infancy. The child care profession has an enormous responsibility to keep children and families together and to promote healthy development of cultural identity for all children.

### *Synchrony Is Important*

An interesting analysis of a videotape of a small group of nursery school children was done by Byers and Byers. The tape showed an African-American child who consistently failed to get her teacher's attention because she was out of synch with the white teacher's "scanning behavior."<sup>6</sup> Although it seems like a small thing, failing to get a teacher's attention can eventually impact how a child feels about herself. She may wonder why she never gets to talk in a

group situation or answer the teacher's questions. Does the teacher dislike her? Is the teacher discounting her? Is she not as smart as the other children? Let's assume that the problem was simply a mismatch between the teacher's scanning behavior and the child's attention-getting behavior. It would be important for the teacher to learn to get more in synch with this child. It would also be important to empower the child in the teacher's culture. Cultural learning is a two-way street. However, it's important that a child not lose her own culture while becoming empowered in the mainstream culture. Cultural identity and family connectedness are vital for emotional health.

You may be thinking that the teacher is ignoring the child on purpose. There's no denying that racism can be a factor in teacher-child interactions. Classism could also be a factor if the teacher perceives this child to be from a low-income family. Of course, it could be a combination of racism and classism. It could also be sexism if further research showed that the teacher pays more attention to boys than girls. Or it could be the child's ability, if the teacher thinks the child has intellectual or other kinds of challenges and ignores her (consciously or unconsciously) because her contribution might not be up to par in the teacher's mind or because the other children might laugh at her. It's always possible that conscious or unconscious bias plays a role in the teacher's scanning behavior. Sometimes a teacher's behavior is simply a lack of understanding or skills; other times, deeply held attitudes are the problem.

Attitudes are harder to change than is a lack of skills. However, knowledge and awareness can help. That's where training comes in.

### *Misunderstandings*

For years I have been teaching about three parenting styles called (among other things) permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative. The research behind this way of looking at parenting made perfect sense to me.<sup>7</sup> I have seen the problems that occur when children have authoritarian parents. I know that controlling and restrictive child-rearing practices predict poor school achievement. What I didn't see was the fact that I was looking at European-American children. Then I read an article by Ruth Chao describing a "paradox" involving the child-rearing practices of Asian parents. Chinese parents are authoritarian, but their children don't exhibit poor school achievement! In fact, they do very well in school. Chao's article broadened my view appreciably. I never considered before that the concept of authoritarianism may have very different meanings depending on the culture. I also never thought about the historical context of authority in this country. As a nation that started with a rebellion against authority, we have a legacy of ambivalence surrounding the concept. The idea of and feelings about authority in other countries is different. When Chinese children are being "controlled" and

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“restricted,” they see their parents’ behavior differently from the way European-American children see their parents’ controlling behavior. My friend and training partner, Intisar Shareef, brings up the issue of authoritarianism and African-American children as well. She says that gentle, unimpassioned, authoritative approaches of European-American teachers don’t work with African-American children who are used to authority looking, acting, and sounding different.

Understanding cultural differences is a subject that goes far beyond what holidays people celebrate and what foods they eat.

### *More Examples of Cultural Differences*

Jim Greenman provides an example of a program designed to be culturally sensitive that ran into a problem.

“There has been an influx of Hmong people from Laos and Cambodia to Minnesota. A child care center with many Hmong children was trying to improve the infant and toddler program by hiring more Hmong staff. The center believed in a language-rich environment and much personal one-to-one interaction between caregiver and baby. With Hmong staff, they got very little language and very little interaction.” This situation provides a very real example of a conflict of style in relating to babies. Greenman goes on to explain. He starts by examining the customs that result in the differences in style. “What would be normal in Hmong society? Mothers strap their babies to them, and this happened at the center. They have constant bodily interaction but not the interaction we know.”<sup>8</sup> A personal account by a workshop participant brings this point home. She was raised in South Africa and has strong memories of being carried on the back of her nanny. She brought the other workshop participants to tears with her description of what that felt like and the strong ties it created between herself and the woman who raised her. Obviously there was a good deal of communication going on between the two even though none of what she described was verbal.

But this book isn’t just about people who come to this country and discover cultural conflicts. It’s also about Canadians and Americans who find themselves in conflict with other Canadians and Americans over cultural differences. These conflicts are in some ways even harder to deal with because of an attitude that says “when in Canada and America, do as the Canadians and Americans do,” which, of course, is a meaningless statement unless you define *which* Canadians and Americans you’re talking about. It’s also harder to deal with because so many believe that “American” means white, European-American, and middle class—taking the “white-is-right” attitude. A further problem is that differences among Americans aren’t always defined as *cultural* differences.

Greenman gives a further example, which relates to experiences I have also had in child care. He tells the story of some African-American parents who complained about sand in their children's hair:

I worked in a center that believed kids should get dirty and be little scientists—it had a wonderful adventure playground. Parents, particularly black parents, would say: “We don’t want our kids going outside. We spend an hour and a half on their hair. Two minutes later they are covered with sand. We can’t get that stuff out and we spend our whole evening cleaning it up. So we don’t want our kids going outside.” For awhile, our earnest and empathic response was: “Gee, that’s too bad. But this really is good for the children.” Of course our knowing response implied, “You poor, ignorant person, valuing appearance over good child development.” Conflict continued and we learned. Now the response to these sorts of issues is: “Okay, let’s figure this out. Obviously it’s important to you how your child looks. And you know it’s very good for children to have these sorts of experiences. Let’s come up with a solution.” The assumption is two legitimate points of view—let’s work it out together. In this instance, the answer was shower caps for the kids.<sup>9</sup>

When I told this story at a workshop, two African-American women spoke up right away. “Sand cuts the hair!” one explained to me. “It’s a serious problem!” the other verified.

### *“Let’s Figure This Out”*

So if you’re not going to just say, “This is how we do it here in our program, and you’d better learn our ways,” what do you do? You start by treating the different perspectives as equally valid. When you come from that point of view, you can do some problem solving around the issue and together come up with a solution—like the shower cap one. There’s more about that in Chapter 2.

One reason I wrote this book was to help me and others become aware of and sort out these conflicts. I need help to listen. I know others do too. A quote from Lisa D. Delpit brings this point home. She quotes an African-American who is lamenting what happens in discussions about what is best for African-American children: “When you’re talking to White people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they’re headstrong, they think they know what’s best for *everybody*, for *everybody’s* children. They won’t listen, White folks are going to do what they want to do anyway.”<sup>10</sup> I think back on the times when I’ve been one of those “White women who wouldn’t listen,” or maybe I listened, but I couldn’t hear.

The goal is for adults to discuss potential conflicts and learn to dialogue about them so that children in early care and education programs experience fewer harmful conflicts in approach when the teacher or caregiver and parents disagree about what’s good or right. It’s important for teachers or caregivers

## POINT TO PONDER 1.6

### *What Are Your Feelings about the Word Dependence?*

The word *dependence* may have negative connotations for many who read this book. For that reason, the word *interdependence* is preferred. I purposely used the word *dependence* here to help you see if the word triggered a reaction. Did it? Do you consider *interdependence* or *mutual dependence* more useful terms—terms that indicate two-way dependency rather than one person simply being dependent on the other? How clear are you about the difference between *interdependence* and *codependence*? These two terms are both culturally defined and can't be judged accurately across cultures.

to clarify what they believe is good practice, as well as begin to open up to other perspectives—even those that may conflict with their own.

## A CONTRAST IN VALUES

It's extremely difficult to understand the perspective of someone else—especially when it conflicts with your own. One of the reasons I can't hear or understand someone who is different from me is that I have no perception of the value system. For example, if a mother insists on spoon-feeding a child who is quite capable of feeding herself, I feel upset. Until I understand that she values dependence, we'll have a hard time talking to each other!

How someone can value dependence was a question I asked myself when I first heard of such a thing. To me, being dependent is something to be avoided whenever possible. Of course, I am dependent in many areas of my life, but I don't feel good about it. If you had a reaction to the word *dependence*, which occurs many times on this page, check out the ideas in *Point to Ponder 1.6*.

### *Differing Perspectives on Dependence*

It has been hard for me to understand that dependence is something desired and even sought after by some cultures. In fact, some families *train* their children in dependence as well as independence. Joe Tobin, coauthor of *Preschool in Three Cultures*, told me about lessons in dependence he discovered in Japan. These lessons begin about the time babies start trying to do things for themselves. The idea is to teach children to “graciously receive help.” A friend of mine from Taiwan, Rose Chou, explained the concept again to me. Whenever she visits her grandmother, Rose lets her

grandmother care for her and do things for her because it makes her grandmother happy.


According to Edward Stewart, cultures other than Asian see dependence differently from the way American and Canadian mainstream cultures do: "Dependence is not deplored by the Latin as it is by Americans."

He also explains why dependence is valued: "Dependence on others is desirable, for it strengthens the relationship among people." Stewart broadens the example Rose Chou gave me by reversing it: "Chinese parents take pride in being dependent on their children and supported by them in a manner to which they are unaccustomed."<sup>11</sup>

By giving cultural information such as this, and by putting cultural labels on people and behavior, I run the risk of promoting stereotypes that already exist and perhaps even creating some new ones. Upon looking at the literature, I've discovered biased ways of reporting research results that compare cultures in negative ways. It's easy for me to do that too, without even realizing it. When I lift facts out of their context or behaviors out of their cultures or environments, I'm in danger of confusing the issues. And if I speculate where certain practices came from, I'm in danger of being wrong. After all, very few parents can explain why they do what they do with their children, if they even recognize they are doing it at all. Many child care and education practices are handed down generation after generation and aren't explained in terms of adaptation for survival of the species and the culture.

Cultural labels are necessarily generalizations. As soon as I mention a reference that talks about the Chinese, for example, a good number of people who identify themselves as Chinese will say, "I'm not like that" or "I don't have that value." If "Mexicans" are compared with "Americans," that's a gross generalization. Which "Mexicans"? Which "Americans"? You have to consider age, income level, geographic location, ethnicity, family origins, history, dynamics, and a whole lot more. Then, even after you find two families who are the same in all these factors, individuals in that family may differ drastically from each other. My sister and I are nearly the same age, from the same culture, and were raised in the same family, yet we don't agree about what's good for children. How do you feel about the cultural labels I've used so far? Look at *Point to Ponder* 1.7 for ideas to ponder about labels.

Even when you are supersensitive to all the problems of understanding cultural differences I've mentioned, the job is still hard because cultures are constantly changing, especially as they come in contact with other cultures. It's important to recognize that the culture of a first-generation Vietnamese or Hmong immigrant, for example, is different from that of a second- or third-generation member. The culture changes when it comes to another country, even in families trying hard to preserve it. Someone who is Puerto Rican from New York is different from a Puerto Rican from Puerto Rico.


 POINT TO PONDER 1.7
*Labeling People*

Did you react to any labels I have used so far? I've used the terms "Canadians" and "Mexicans" for the people who live above and below the United States. I called the people who live in the United States "Americans." Though those terms are common usage, the truth is that all of those people on the two continents that extend from the Tierra del Fuego to the polar ice cap live in a place called America. Why should the United States have exclusive right to the term "American"? It's a question worth thinking about.

Some differences that can cause misunderstandings and difficulties stem from social class issues. Adrie Kusserow<sup>12</sup> (2004) studied three different neighborhoods of white people. She chose all white people to eliminate race as a factor in her study. Kusserow came up with some interesting information about class differences in the socialization of individualism in America. These differences influence the way families raise their children. Middle-class parents and teachers embody what she called soft individualism—that is, they have a particular concept of the "self" at the core of each child. They see the self as delicate and full of promise, like a flower. Protecting self-esteem is important. They tend to teach children that the world is safe and welcoming—open to uniqueness—and that the future holds promise for success and personal achievement. They do all this by giving praise and encouragement, fostering creativity, and respecting and encouraging emotional expression.

Middle-class people with their ideas about soft individualism often work with children whose parents have a very different idea about what their children need to grow up in the world where they live. According to Kusserow, low-income people see the world as dangerous and regard their job as toughening up their children to face an uncertain future. They may hold expectations that their children will achieve success, but it won't come easy. Parents do this toughening up through such devices as teasing and criticizing. They tend to use strict discipline and avoid soft nurturing techniques. They neither spoil nor indulge their children. They don't see the self as delicate but hard and protective. They appreciate when their children are strong and determined. These may also be cultural differences, but even members of the same culture have different perspectives, expectations, and child-rearing practices by living in different contexts.

Ruby Payne (2003) came up with similar differences as she explored how people in poverty think, live, and raise their children. Context matters, regardless of what culture you come from. See *Point to Ponder* 1.8 for more issues related to poverty that educators and educational reformers face.



 POINT TO PONDER 1.8*Class Differences*

In a now classic study, Darla Ferris Miller<sup>13</sup> (1989) focused on the influence that income level has on the way adults socialize infants and toddlers. Using social reproduction theory, Miller pointed out that adults treat children in ways that make them continue to fit in with the family and the neighborhood (social class). That kind of socialization keeps systems in place so that with few exceptions, low-income people tend to remain low-income generation after generation, and middle-income people to do the same. As a result, class creates educational differences as well as economic ones. Miller's observations and conclusions show that cultural differences are influenced by the economic context of the family and the community and those differences can survive countless generations. What can be thought of as class differences are instituted early and last a lifetime. People who move from one income level to another can experience a good deal of pain and difficulty as family and friends get left behind. At the same time, if educators don't recognize how social reproduction works, we can't do much toward making the world a more equitable place. The dilemma is about how to work for change and still accept people just as they are. When we work for change, we must always ask ourselves if we are trying to put our values on somebody else.

The theorist who demanded that educators regard context as important is Uri Bronfenbrenner<sup>14</sup> who gave us the idea of the ecology of human development and urged us to move our focus from the child alone to the child in the context of the family and community. He says that we *must* regard the context as an important factor in child growth and development. Children come to our programs nested in ever-larger contexts, which influence them and upon which they also have some influence. Bronfenbrenner's work has contributed to our understanding of diversity. A growing trend, as a result of Bronfenbrenner's work, is that some programs are beginning to move from calling themselves "child-centered" to calling themselves "family-centered" programs. As one of the founders of Head Start, Bronfenbrenner helped ensure that the program is comprehensive and family focused.

So what do you do when you discover that diversity is much more complex than just learning about cultural differences and finding labels that fit them? You may throw up your hands and decide to eliminate cultural differences as a valid concept and instead just look at people as individuals. My advice is not to give up on understanding cultural differences, but remember that the way to approach that challenge is to develop relationships with people who are different from yourself. Knowing people personally, communicating with them,

and treating them with respect creates deeper understanding and can solve many complex dilemmas. When you do that, you take the risk of making mistakes, but that's how we learn.

### *Focus on Themes and Trends*

I've tried to minimize the mistakes by dealing whenever possible with conflicts in themes and trends. My original intention was to describe only conflicts, not cultures, so I tried to contrast cultures without naming them. I didn't want to categorize and label. I was trying to avoid a tendency of my culture: to analyze everything and put it into boxes. My goal was to raise questions rather than provide answers. But as I used the various drafts of this book in my classes and workshops, I got so much pressure to be more specific that I gave in and decided to provide references and examples. By doing that, I know I will offend those who find their culture pictured in what seems to them an unflattering way. I know sensitive people will find bias in what I've chosen to include and eliminate. I know some won't relate to what I say here about their culture. I'm sorry. I know I will step on toes, but my hope is that more good will come out of it than harm.

This chapter has looked at cultural differences to promote a particular message. Adults working with children and parents in child care and education settings need to regard sensitivity, respect, communication, and problem solving as keys to providing what children need. I propose we each work hard to reconcile differences in beliefs while tuning in to the individual needs of each child in our care in ways that promote his or her own culture.

### *Transformative Education*

Transformative education occurs when two people or groups come together and interact in such a way that both are transformed. Even though one may be the official teacher and the other the designated learner, those roles become less differentiated when education is transformative. Transformative education is a desired effect in the presence of diversity. Transformative education comes from respectful interactions and ongoing dialogues. When we acknowledge that our experiences with one another are important, when we stretch to understand different points of view, we become transformed by each other's life experiences to a different level of knowledge and sensitive multiethnic care. **That's good for children!**

If we are continually open and sensitive, we will encounter dilemmas. Most of the time there is no one answer, only a continual process of dialogue. See *Point to Ponder 1.9* for additional comments about what's good for children and how dialogues aid interactions.

## POINT TO PONDER 1.9

### *What's Good for Children: A Multiethnic View*

It's good for children to receive **culturally competent** care that is sensitive and has a **global, multiethnic view**.

Culturally competent care **requires** that:

- Adults in children's lives respect each other.
- Adults in children's lives work to understand each other's perspectives.
- Caregivers and parents understand how program and family values may differ and work together toward blending differing value systems.
- Adults in children's lives create **ongoing dialogues**.

### *Dialogues*

- Dialogues ensure that information is exchanged so that good judgment can result from the blending of shared points of view.
- Dialogues require that everyone who works with children is both a teacher and a learner. Professionals must be willing to understand each other and to view parents as the experts who know what's good for their children.
- Dialogues occur when the people involved begin by listening to each other instead of judging each other.

My newest dilemma concerns babies and sleeping positions. To be both culturally sensitive and wise, you must be aware that research shows that SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome or "crib death") risk increases when babies are put to sleep on their stomachs.<sup>15</sup> Yet how many parents, for individual and cultural reasons, prefer that their babies sleep in a prone position? You have to talk about it!

## SUMMARY

Everyone moves within a cultural framework; it is important for those working with young children to recognize this fact. Culture is mostly unconscious and many people of the dominant culture in any country may be unaware that they even have a culture. They may think their way of doing things is just normal or regular. This chapter questions the idea of "normal" and asks the reader to expand his or her definition to include a greater variety of people, ideas, and behaviors. The idea of cultural pluralism is introduced as a goal for society, and much of the rest of the chapter looks at how to reach that goal in early care and education programs. Children are raised to be members of their culture starting in infancy. This chapter presents examples of

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differences between what families believe and do and the principles, practices, and policies in early care and education programs. Because synchrony is important in the lives of young children, early childhood educators are urged to be responsive to families' differences. Perceiving those differences without judging them to be inferior or wrong is a challenge to early care and education professionals, and trying to do this can result in misunderstandings. "Let's figure this out together" should be the theme song of teachers in the face of disagreements over what children need. One area of disagreement may be over the value of interdependence in programs designed to move children ever increasingly toward independence. The answer is not simple parent education where the teacher transmits information to the families to increase their knowledge and effectiveness. In the face of disagreements, the parent education approach is inadequate. A better strategy is to focus on transformative education, where two people or groups come together and everyone is changed by the encounter.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

- Barrera, I. and R. Corso. *Skilled Dialogue*. Baltimore: Brookes, 2003. A must-read for early childhood educators and special educators. Provides useful ideas about how to create successful interactions with diverse young children and their families.
- Casper, V. *Very Young Children in Lesbian- and Gay-Headed Families: Moving Beyond Acceptance*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three, January, 18-26, 2003. Reminds the reader that theories that have shaped thinking in the field of early childhood education have been extremely gender and class biased. The author challenges the reader to understand that 1.9 million children in the United States have at least one gay parent and these children and families deserve the same attention and respect as any other family.
- Clay, J. "Creating safe, just places to learn for children of lesbian and gay parents: The NAEYC Code of Ethics in Action." *Young Children* 59(6):34-38, 2004. A director of a Quaker preschool surveyed the seven lesbian- and gay-headed families enrolled to find out their experience in the school. He also surveyed his staff and discovered from the two sets of interviews how to work more effectively with families.
- Darling-Hammon, L.; J. French; and S. P. Garcia-Lopez. *Learning to Teach for Social Justice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002. A group of student teachers learns how to teach for social justice and change, exploring such questions as What is diversity?
- Ellison, S. *Don't Be So Defensive!* Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 1998. Explains how defensiveness gets in the way of communication and how to communicate nondefensively.
- Garner, A. *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004. About the challenges and gifts of being raised by gay parents. Debunks the anti-gay myth that children of gay parents grow up damaged and confused. They do have some unique pressures, not due to their parents' sexuality, but to homophobia and prejudice.

- Gelnaw, A.; M. Brickley; H. Marsh; and D. Ryan. *Opening Doors: Lesbian and Gay Parents and Schools*. Washington, DC: Family Pride Coalition, 2004. A handbook for parents and educators that explores the relationship between parents, their children, child care, and school personnel to create a more inclusive educational environment for children of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parents.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. "Dialog to Understanding Across Cultures." in *The Art of Leadership*, eds. B. Neugebauer and R. Neugebauer. Redmond, WA: Child Care Information Exchange, 2003. Examines issues in early care and education programs that go beyond simple cultural misunderstandings.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. and I. Shareef. "Discussing Diverse Perspectives on Guidance." *Young Children* 60(6), 34-38, 2005. Looks at a variety of differences when it comes to discipline and guidance. Discusses how to work out the differences in a care and education setting.
- Hall, E. T. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1977. An eye-opening book about hidden culture and differences.
- Kusserow, A. S. *American Individualisms: Child Rearing and Social Class in Three Neighborhoods*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. Looks at the differences in the way low-income white people and middle-income white people socialize their children into one of two types of individualism. Contrasts what Kusserow calls "soft individualism" with "hard individualism."
- Payne, R. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, Inc., 2003. A comprehensive look at the hidden rules of economic class and strategies for overcoming them. Distinguishes between situational poverty and generational poverty. The book is loaded with information gathered over the years by the author about poverty, middle class, and wealth.
- Shareef, I. and J. Gonzalez-Mena. "Beneath the Veneers of Resistance and Professionalism." *Exchange*, May 1997, pp. 6-8. Looks at how racism affects attitudes of early childhood educators and how attitudes affect communication.

## NOTES

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3. W. Caudill, and L. Frost, "A Comparison of Maternal Care and Infant Behavior in Japanese-American, American, and Japanese Families," in W. P. Lebra, ed., *Youth, Socialization, and Mental Health*, vol. 3 of *Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), p. 3.
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6. P. Byers, and H. Byers, 1974, in S. Lubeck, *The Sandbox Society: Early Education in Black and White America*. (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1985), p. 36.
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10. L. D. Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (August 1988), pp. 280-297.
11. E. C. Stewart, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1972), p. 72.
12. A. S. Kusserow, *American Individualisms: Child Rearing and Social Class in Three Neighborhoods*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
13. D. F. Miller, *First Steps Toward Cultural Difference: Socialization in Infant/Toddler Day Care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1989.
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