

Welcome to the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) Pathways to Cultural Competence Project!

The goal of NAEYC's Pathways to Cultural Competence Project is to give early childhood programs that are participating in their state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) two checklists to help guide them in reflecting and improving upon their use of culturally-competent practices. The Pathways to Cultural Competence Project is funded by the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation.

You may have questions about what we mean by "cultural competence" or "culturally-competent practices" as well as how you should go about handling this process of reflecting upon culturally competent practices in your program. We will answer below those two main questions, What do you mean by "culture" and "cultural competence?" and What process should early childhood programs use to reflect on their level of cultural competence?

What do you mean when you talk about "culture" and "cultural competence"?

NAEYC believes that "[f]or optimal development and learning of all children, educators must **accept** the legitimacy of children's home language, **respect** (hold in high regard) the home culture, and **promote** and **encourage** the active involvement and support of all families, including extended and nontraditional family units" (NAEYC 1995, 2). Since all children are rooted in their families we see a child's family structure and all that it entails as the core of their family's culture. This structure can include family socioeconomic status, family composition, parent's level of educational attainment, abilities of children and family members, family's immigration status, family's religion, family's home and preferred languages, parent's sexual orientation, and the way that a family classifies its race and ethnicity.

Hedy Chang has written that culturally competent early childhood programs are those that have skilled and effective teachers, low teacher-child ratios and appropriate group sizes, age-appropriate curriculum, engaged families, well-designed facilities, linkages to comprehensive services, culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment, and available and accessible bilingual education and services.

And so, for the early childhood field, cultural competence translates into a commitment to engage in an ongoing process of learning and developing multiple and various solutions that yield effective practices. Teachers can work "to make the most of children's potential, strengthening and building upon the skills they bring when they enter programs" (NAEYC 1995, 3). As Copple and Bredekamp state: "When young children are in a group setting outside the home, what makes sense to them, how they use language to interact, and how they experience this new world depend on the social and cultural contexts to which they are accustomed. A skilled teacher takes such contextual factors into account, along with the children's ages and their individual differences, in shaping all aspects of the learning environment" (NAEYC 2009, 10).

Also as a part of this process, program directors can:

- recruit and retain a diverse teaching staff
- provide leadership and professional development opportunities for themselves and staff that support culturally competent practices
- ensure that they and their staff access the proper training to provide guidance and strategies for working toward a higher level of cultural competence beyond what QRIS criteria may dictate
- create a culture of intentionality around increasing their program's level of cultural competence so that it is understood that cultural competence is an integral part of providing a high-quality program
- take the lead in creating an environment that promotes equity, learning, growth and development for children, families, and teaching staff

What process should early childhood programs use to reflect on their level of cultural competence?

The Project is using two separate but connected checklists for early childhood programs – one that is a daily checklist for teachers and one that program directors will complete with teachers to assess how culturally-competent practices are being used in the program.

It is hoped that participating programs will use the checklists in two ways – teachers will use the teacher checklist for a specific amount of time to reflect on their classroom practices and then discuss these practices with their program director. Some teachers may want to drill down on certain practices from the checklist and journal about their experiences as they reflect on their use in the classroom. The program director will then use the information from conversations with staff, as well as observation, to reflect upon overall program practices and complete the program checklist. The goal is for staff in early childhood programs to reflect upon the program's use of culturally-competent practices and determine areas in which they can improve.

Resources will be made available to participating early childhood programs after they have completed their first reflection to make a plan for increasing their level of cultural competence in those areas that they have identified. Participating early childhood programs will be asked to document this process in a short survey, and then will work on increasing their use of culturally-competent practices. Then, in 2011, it is hoped that programs will complete this process again, focusing on how they have increased their level of cultural competence and their progress, and identifying any barriers encountered in this work and how they overcame these obstacles. We hope that early childhood programs will look at this process as an opportunity to reflect upon and increase their use of culturally-competent practices in an authentic way.

The checklists are arranged by the concepts of cultural competence that were developed by a group of nationally-recognized experts in 2008. The summarized concepts are:

Concept 1: “Children are nested in families.”

Concept 2: “Identify shared goals among families and staff.”

Concept 3: “Authentically incorporate cultural traditions and history in the classroom.”

Concept 4: “Acknowledge child development as a culturally-driven, ongoing process that should be supported across contexts in a child’s life (e.g., school and home).”

Concept 5: “Individuals and institutions’ practices are embedded in culture.”

Concept 6: “Ensure decisions and policies embrace home languages and dialects.”

Concept 7: “Ensure policies and practices embrace and respect families cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs toward learning.”

Concept 8: “Equalize balances of power; counter stereotyping and bias through intentional teaching.”

The most important thing that you can do while you use these checklists is to see this as an ongoing process. We know that some of these concepts and practices on the checklists may seem overwhelming, but it’s important to remember that you are committing yourself to taking part in a process of reflection and quality improvement (based on cultural competence) over time. For **Program Directors and Teachers**, there are four principles to keep in mind when beginning this process of reflecting upon culturally competent practices in the classroom.

1. **Teacher Reflection**

- A) Reflect on how your individual values, beliefs, and practices regarding children’s learning are influenced by aspects of their own personal culture and linguistic experience.
- B) Reflect on how the program where you work is influenced by culture and language.

2. **Intentional Practice**

- A) Identify shared childrearing goals with families; align your classroom decision-making and practices with these goals.
- B) Plan ahead to address potential language or cultural barriers.

3. **Strength-Based Perspective**

- A) Acknowledge that you can learn from families.
- B) Recognize that diversity enriches and provides depth to the overall learning experience.
- C) Understand that different does not mean dysfunctional.
- D) Respect and support the preservation of children and families’ home languages, cultural backgrounds, and childrearing beliefs, goals, and practices.
- E) Incorporate aspects of children’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds in daily learning activities. Demonstrate strengths that exist across cultures.

4. **Open, Ongoing, Two-Way Communication** between teachers and families.

- A) Ensure that families have opportunities to give your input. Families should not solely be recipients of information.
- B) Plan ahead to address language barriers.