FAMILY SERVICES
Legacy
A FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY
Acclimate • Stabilize • Permanency

Best Cultural Practices in Foster Care

Introduction

If you're like me, the term cultural competency evokes feelings of a political nature. It has become a buzzword in the media, and quite frankly is not always used to unite people. The purpose of this training manual is not to engage in political rhetoric, but rather discuss how culture plays a significant role in foster care, and how we use culture to provide the very best services possible. Hopefully, by the time we are done, the word cultural competency will evoke thoughts of compassion, trust, and understanding.

If you are reading this booklet, the chances are you have decided to become – or already are – a foster parent (or you work for Legacy as an employee or contractor). It is an incredible undertaking; there are fewer gifts greater than opening your home to a child in need. And while fostering may be the most rewarding thing you ever do, it will likely be one of the most challenging. In the best situations, you will be called upon to show compassion, understanding, and endless patience.

California is a great place to live. Aside from having the best beaches, mountains, and recreational spots in the world, we also have a population of diverse culture and backgrounds. This gives California variety and pizzazz.

That being said, being a foster parent (Resource Family) in California comes with the expectation that the foster children will have a broad range of cultural backgrounds, race, and ethnicity. In 2015, the State reported that Kern, Tulare, and Santa Barbara County's make up of foster children was as follows;

Rate per 1,000 children in each category:

	Kern County	Tulare County	Santa Barbara County
African American	14	28.9	19.6
American Indian	0.0	0.0	0
Asian	2.4	0.0	0
Hispanic/Latino	4.9	6.3	3.7
White	8.1	7.9	3.7
Total Children	6.0	6.7	3.7

As of 2017, the counties that Legacy serves report the following demographics:

	Kern County	Tulare County	Santa Barbara County
African American	5.6% (47.5K)	1.7% (7.5K)	2.0% (8.5K)
Asian	4.3% (36.2K)	3.4% (15.0K)	5.0% (21.4K)
Hispanic/Latino	49.4% (419K)	60.7% (271K)	42.7% (183K)
White	37.9% (321K)	31.9% (143K)	47.4% (203K)
Other	2.9% (24.1K)	62.4% (10.4K)	2.9% (12.1K)

These statistics indicate that children placed in Legacy foster homes will most likely have a cultural barrier to overcome. The purpose of this training is to help foster parents (Resource Families) turn cultural barriers into cultural strengths. It is to help foster families become culturally-competent and culturally-sensitive.

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Section 1: What is "Cultural Competency?"

The word culture can be defined many different ways. Perhaps that is why many struggle to understand how to address cultural differences and behaviors. Generally speaking, culture is defined as a set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and standards of behavior that are passed down from one generation to another. Culture is taught by many different facets of our environment. It is taught by family, friends, media, associations, experiences, and anything that influences our thinking and lifestyle. Our culture establishes a feeling of what is normal and what should be expected in our lives. Culture extends to almost everything we do. It includes the food we eat, our language, dress, problem solving techniques, and treatment of others. Culture also includes our ethnicity, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, and physical abilities. Culture even spans one's sexual orientation, age, gender, and generation in which we live. The term can be so broad that asking someone about their culture may take the conversation just about anywhere.

What is Culture?

- Food
- Language
- Dress
- Problem Solving
- Relationships
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Socioeconomics
- Disabilities
- Gender
- Sexual Orientation
- Age
- Generation

Despite the broad ranging definition of culture, understanding another person's culture is the key to understanding how they think and behave. This is why culture is so important to the work we do in Foster Care. We must become competent in our approach to other cultures if we hope to have success in working with the children placed in our stewardship. Competency means the ability to do something successfully and efficiently. It carries the idea that we can identify with other cultures without insult or offense. It means we know how to gather understanding of someone's culture in such a way that they feel safe sharing the things that are of most importance to them, and then returning understanding and respect for the differences we share. This is often referred to as cultural sensitivity. It means that we are thoughtful, diplomatic, and kind in our approach to someone else's culture.

Resource Parents must understand that all the children placed into their homes will come with their own unique culture. No child will match your culture, and subsequently think and act the way you do or expect they will. Understanding this is the first step to successful placement.

Legacy Social Services Workers are expected to work with all cultures. They are expected to work in a sensitive manner with a broad variety of Resource Families and Foster Children. This means that they must develop and continue to develop competency with a wide diversity of cultures. This competency should be at a level that they can teach others what it means to be culturally-competent and sensitive.

Section 2: Knowing and understanding the culture of Foster Care

For many years, I have experienced individuals who work in the Foster Fare system without understanding that it has a culture of its own. Children placed in Foster Care are exposed to an environment unique to the system of care and consequently develop a Foster Care Culture. Like most cultures, the Foster Care Culture can differ from person to person. Even so, there are some commonalities to be aware of.

Generally speaking, foster children have been removed from their adult guardians due to lack of care, or inappropriate care. Adults in the Child Protective Services facilitated their removal from their homes of origin. Adults in the Judiciary placed them into a foreign environment. Adults in the Human Services Department found them a Resource Family, and now they reside in Foster Care. It is not uncommon for children in foster care to develop a culture of distrust in adults and the system designed to protect them. This is further amplified if they experience multiple placements within the system.

The Foster Care culture is different in many ways from what many of us might expect of our own culture with regards to home life. Children and Resource Parents in the system of care are exposed to a high level of oversight and legal requirements. The culture of Foster Care includes regular visits from agency social workers, county social workers, and less frequent visits from the State. It requires extra transportation to court mandated visits, medical appointments, school meetings, and a host of trainings and planning meetings.

Foster children may struggle to feel like they belong, or that they have a home. They may feel alone or out of their element. They may feel like they are suddenly different from all their friends. This can often result in behavioral problems as they seek to understand the culture of Foster Care.

Some foster children learn the culture of Foster Care. They see the weaknesses in the system and learn how to use them to their advantage. This often results in poor outcomes.

Resource Families need to understand that the culture of Foster Care requires more from them than they might expect from raising children outside of the system of care. I have heard foster

parents and potential foster parent say, “I have raised children of my own, this will be no different”.

It is common for people to assume that regardless of the background of a child, a safe and healthy environment will solve everything. There is a common assumption that the foster home’s culture is desirable, and that the children will assimilate into it without issue. That is rarely the case. Foster parents should be keenly aware of the risks associated with ignoring a child’s culture.

What are some of the risks for a child whose cultural identity is not maintained?

Write your answers here:

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Your answers may include things like;

- The child may act out, or manifest behavioral issues.
- The child may withdraw, become depressed, or disconnect from school and other vital activities.
- A child loses a large part of his/her identity.
- The child may resent the foster parents and the foster home.
- Minimizing the importance of cultural identity can be interpreted by a child as minimizing the child’s importance.
- Reduced capacity for connection to caregiver because of cross-cultural communication differences.

We know that children in foster care potentially face the loss of so many connections; connections that make them who they are. It is our job to help them maintain these connections, including cultural ones, so that they may maintain a sense of identity and their sense of self-worth. Maintaining a person’s culture helps maintain a feeling of safety and security.

We should all take the time to understand the cultures of those we interact with; especially those that are placed in a position that could be classified as a significant relationship. Foster children are in this significant position. Consequently, we must ask, "what can I do to understand their culture better?"

Write your answers here:

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Your answers may include things like;

- Talk to them, with an emphasis on listening and observing…..it is amazing what you will learn.
- Ask questions with sincerity and a desire to know about them.
- Respond with a desire to help them.
- Include in them the solutions to their concerns and problems, help them feel a part of things.
- Study and read about the culture from good and reputable sources.
- Talk and work with individuals from their culture.
- Participate in the daily life of the culture.
- Learn their language.

In addition to dealing with the different cultures associated with foster children, it is not uncommon for foster parents to have children from races different than their own. They call this transracial parenting. Transracial foster families consist of children of one race or culture being raised by parents of a different race or culture. Transracial families are considered families of color. With the proper insight and understanding, transracial families draw from the strengths of various races and cultures resulting in a powerful family dynamic. Children raised in these conditions can develop a beautiful understanding of other people. They can grow up being a source of strength to the community at large.

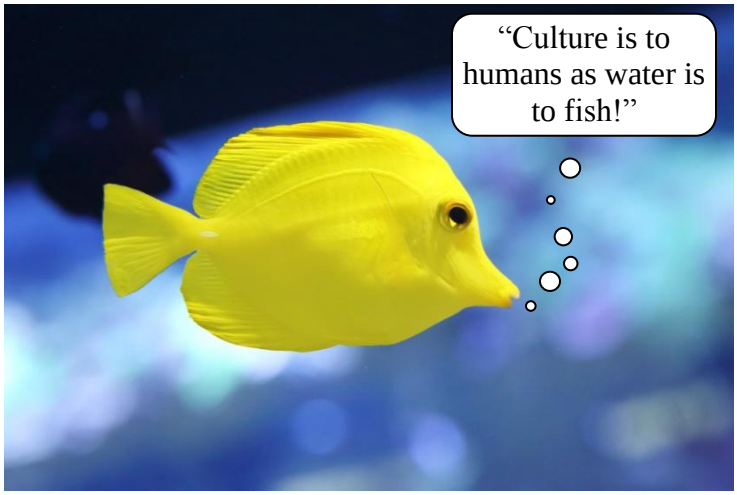
The strength of adapting multiple cultures results in children learning from multiple points of view. While this is a strength, foster parents must be cautious that children are properly immersed in all the various cultures. The danger is that children will lose connection with their culture of origin, while never becoming part of the new cultures they interact with.

Personal Story: My father was an immigrant from Denmark to the United States. Though he was Caucasian, his heavy Danish accent and strong Danish heritage created a barrier to him feeling truly part of the American culture. He often felt "separated" or "not a part" of the culture Americans have developed. Interestingly, because he didn't maintain ties with his homeland, when he returned home for a visit, he found that he had a soft American accent when he spoke Danish. He also found that he had fallen out of touch with his own culture. Consequently, my father told me that he felt like a man without a home. He was neither Danish nor American. It is important that our foster child don't lose connection with their culture of origin, and at the same time feel included in the culture of the resource family. By connecting children to their own race and culture, they will learn to grow in their roots while incorporating what they are learning from you about their identity in a transracial home. They become bicultural, bridging the gap between the two worlds.

Often, foster parents (Resource Families) are unprepared for the dynamics of transracial parenting. They see the various cultural nuances as different, and become concerned or frustrated. They wonder why the foster children don't act the way they expected, or they don't understand why they don't eagerly embrace the family's lifestyle. Sadly, there are foster parents who ask for children to be removed from their homes because they find themselves in this situation. Legacy expects parents, and staff to work through the cultural differences. Giving up on children who are "too different" denies both parties the opportunity to grow and develop. Working through the difficult periods of transition is just the price we pay to gain fruitful and productive relationships.

Section 3: Universal Culture

To connect with your foster child, you must first engage them on a universal level – the level that children across all cultures respond to, that stands on the premise that all children are alike in certain respects. Simple things like tucking them in at night or saying, "Thanks for coming into our home," can go a long way. Your child's basic needs for feeling safe and cared for can be fulfilled by exercising common courtesies such as good listening, smiling and using praise, being respectful, being a good role model, and remaining optimistic. Demonstrating these universal qualities set the stage for cultural inclusiveness within your home and is the first step in getting to know your foster child at a deeper, interpersonal level.



The success of foster parents seems to depend more on their personalities rather than their credentials. Foster parents who are warm, understanding, committed, and strongly motivated to help are much more effective with their foster children. And the success of foster families absolutely requires your entire family to be on board with your decision to become a foster parent. It also requires that "universal culture" become part of your home life.

What can you do, or what will be your plan, to help all the children in your home feel comfortable and accepted, regardless of their culture or yours?

Write your answers here:

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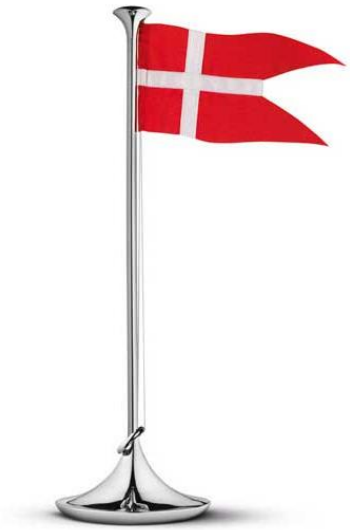
Your answers may include;

- A family rule that we don't resort to name-calling.
- We say "I love you" on a regular basis.
- We make it a practice to say "you seem upset, how can I help?" rather than "why are you being such a jerk?"
- We promote random acts of kindness, maybe even make a family game of it.
- We practice leaving random notes of encouragement.

Personal Story: When I left home at 19 years old and moved to Denmark, it was a big move for me. I had never been away from home for any extended period. I would have my own place in Denmark, with a roommate that I didn't know. Shortly after arriving, my Danish aunt came to visit. She came holding a Danish flag, homemade Danish cookies, and a bag full of food. During the two years that I was there, I regularly received letters and visits from my extended family. They treated me in such a way that I felt special. I felt welcome into their homes at any time, and as though I was a guest of honor. I was still learning their culture, and for that matter their language, but from the very beginning I understood acts of love. People later asked me if I was ever home sick while in Denmark. I missed being home, but I was never home sick. Those simple acts of love made all the difference.



Section 4: Understanding your own culture

We view the world through our own cultural lens. This lens affects how we see ourselves and how we see others. It also has a significant impact on the choices we make and the paths we take in our lives.

Learning how cultural influences have molded your own life opens a window of self-awareness that allows you to honestly look at how your preferences, bias, and perceptions all play a part in your views of and interactions with people of other cultures and classes.

We cannot give away that which we do not possess. If you are unaware of how culture has affected your own thoughts, communications, language, beliefs, values, practices, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors, how can we be sensitive to others? We must gain an understanding of why we are the way we are.

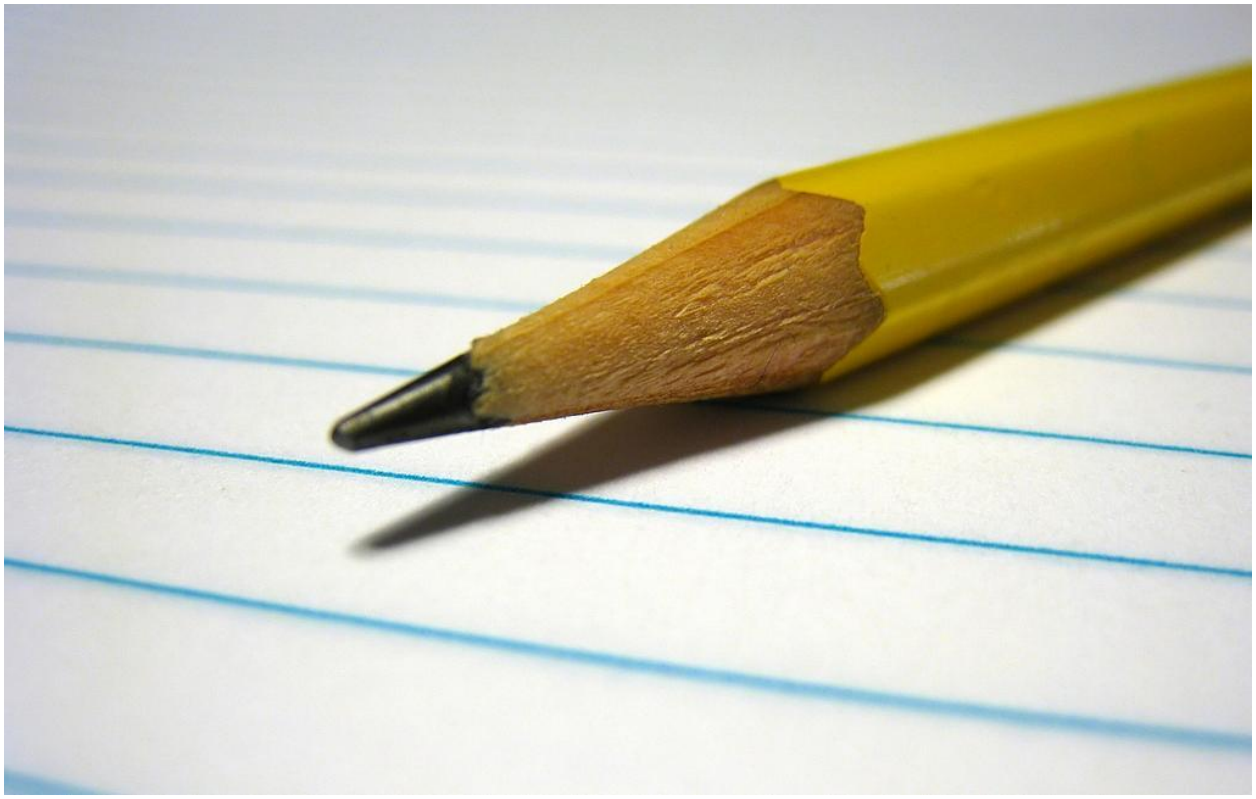
Personal Story: My father was raised during World War II. He was raised in occupied Denmark. He remembered Nazi soldiers visiting his home, and the difficulties of war. Food was hard to come by, and work was just as difficult. Consequently, his family developed a culture created by their circumstances. They were all extremely hard-working and cautious with their resources. My father was just a young boy when this part of his culture was developed. After he moved to America and started his own family, this element of his culture was firmly in place. I remember my father working extremely hard. He worked long hours, and then worked when he got home. He was always doing something. As a young man, I remember him going to work sick. He suffered from extreme migraine headaches, which would result in vomiting. He would go to work, pulling over on the way there to vomit. I once asked him why he didn't call in sick and stay home. His response has stuck with me my whole life. He said, "Martin, you may never be the smartest employee or the most skilled, but you can always be reliable. You can always show up and be on time to work. If you do this, you will always have a job." This is an element of my culture. Consequently, I rarely miss work. I work when I am sick. I must admit that because of my cultural teachings, I have less empathy than I should have for those who call in sick for work. Even so,

understanding that this attitude is cultural, helps me be more sympathetic to those not raised under my same circumstances.

Aside from just evaluating your own culture, it is important to evaluate your own beliefs about other cultures and other races before parenting transracial children. Sadly, our own cultures may have developed distorted and inaccurate views of other cultures. Every person has biases, and uncovering them is a lesson in self-awareness and an opportunity for personal growth. Simply identifying our cultural shortcomings is a giant step towards correcting them.

At this point, pause and take the **Self-Assessment Tool** that accompanies this manual.

PAUSE, take the Self Assessment, and then RESUME

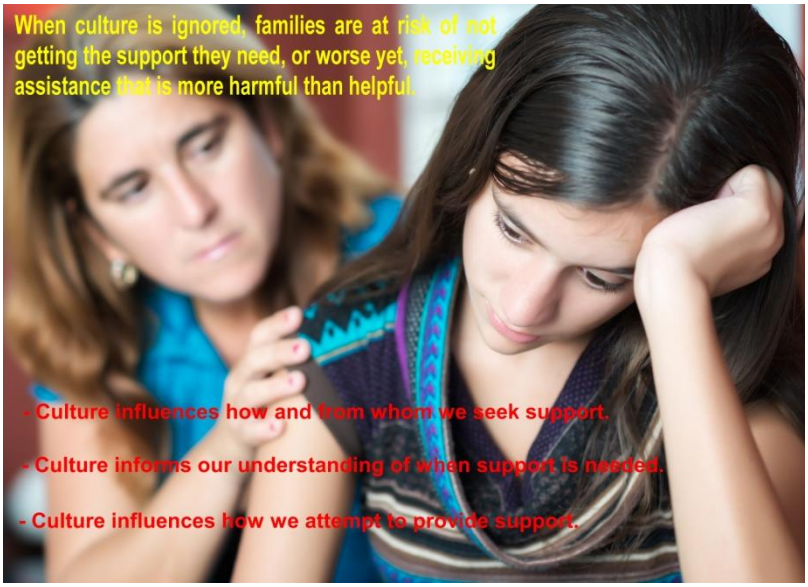


The self-assessment is a private tool and never meant to be shared. It is to help you identify areas where you might be weak in relation to other cultures, and to help you identify areas of your own culture that are a mystery to you. Hopefully you will use the tool to learn more about yourself, and identify areas of potential improvement.

Section 5: Legacy's model is designed around cultural sensitivity

While the law prohibits placement based on race, you must assess your own ability to effectively parent children of other cultures including other races, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, sexual preferences, etc.

When culture is ignored, families are at risk of not getting the support they need, or worse yet, receiving assistance that is more harmful than helpful. Legacy believes that doing work on the front end of the relationship, makes the work on the long term relationship easier. What that means is, the sooner we establish a relationship of trust, the more capable we are of working through problems, differences, and concerns. We trust individuals when we know that they have our best interest at heart, when we know that they respect our culture and wishes, and when proper and fair expectations are set and maintained. Below are some of the procedural things Legacy has established to help establish cultural security:



Referral and Acceptance of Placements: Legacy has designed an interactive process that considers the cultural needs of the children we are thinking about placing within the agency. We work hard to understand the Resource Family's culture, skills, and abilities as we make placement matches. The overall goal for placements is to pair children up with foster parents in such a way that the greatest probability for success might occur. Cultural needs are paramount in this process. For this to be most effective, Legacy is constantly recruiting new resource families with diverse cultural backgrounds. The larger the selection of Resource Families, the better matching can take place.

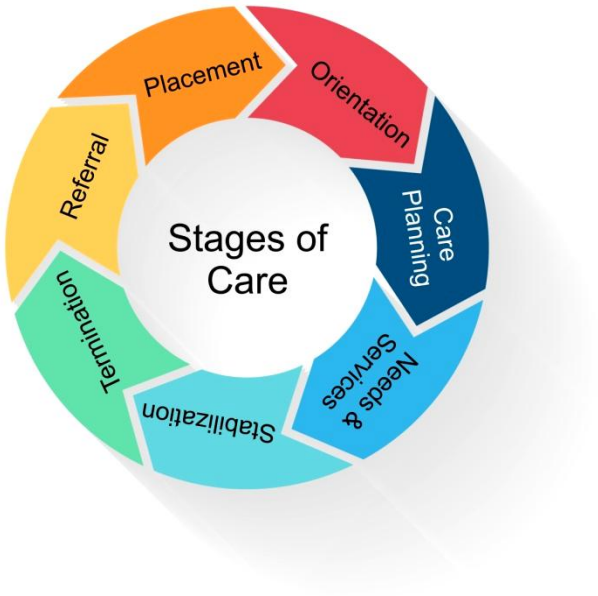
What is your role? We ask that you communicate well during the process. Express concerns and potential weaknesses. There is nothing shameful about expressing feelings regarding the potential challenges presented to us. Good decisions are generally made by having good facts.

Placement of Children into a Resource Family: Communication is vital in most aspects of our lives. This is especially true of Foster Care. Legacy's process includes a formal discussion with the resource parents regarding the unique needs and circumstances of the child entering placement. This is required to be done prior to and more formally at placement. We cannot meet or be sensitive to needs that we do not understand.

At the time of placement, a Legacy social services worker will facilitate the orientation to the resource home. During this orientation, the social services worker will ask predesigned questions designed to reveal social norms for the child regarding home life. The child's answers will be recorded and used as a point of reference to help the resource home provide a culturally-sensitive home.

Also at the time of placement, a Legacy social services worker will facilitate a "get to know you" conversation between the Resource Family and the foster child being placed. The social services worker will assist in guiding the discussion to reveal cultural commonality and cultural differences between the parties. The Legacy social services worker will work to make all parties comfortable and accepting of each other.

After the foster child has been properly oriented to the home, and introductions have been conducted, the Legacy social services worker will meet confidentially with the resources parents to formulate a care plan for the newly placed child. This care plan will include all the information available on the child and the cultural information collected during placement. Discussion will take place regarding sensitivity required to make the placement successful. This plan will serve as a short term care plan, while a more thorough needs and services plan is developed.

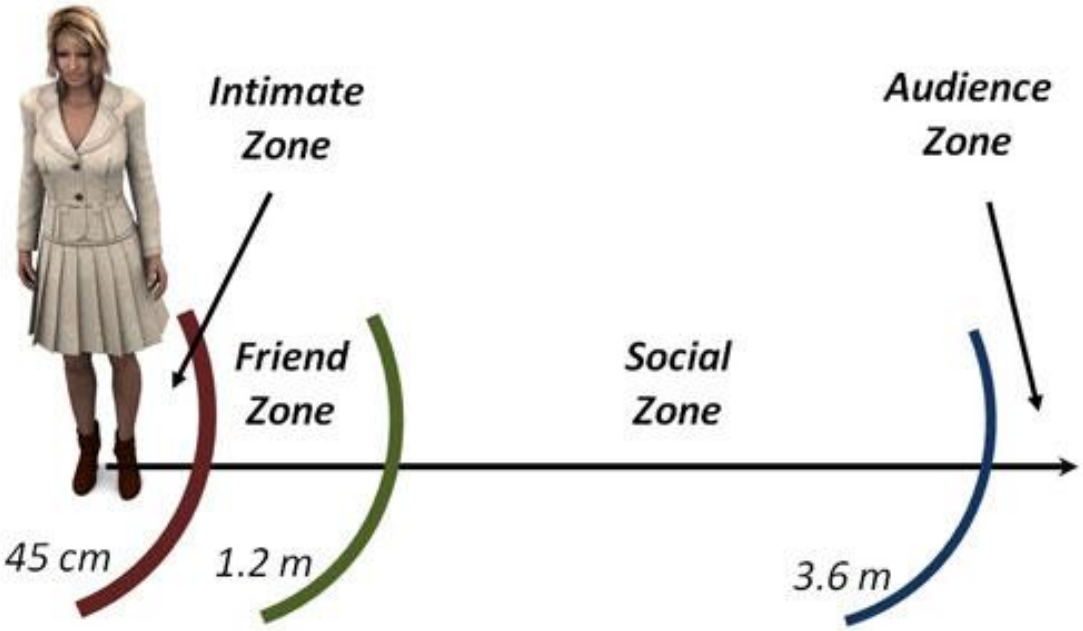


Review of the child's orientation handbook: The Legacy social services worker assigned to your home should meet with each child (age permitting) to review the child's orientation handbook. This handbook helps the child express goals, concerns, desires, and hopes. It also informs the child of his/her rights. It is a powerful tool, if used properly, to give us insight into the child's mind. It also helps the child feel part of the process.

Establishing and building a relationship of trust: People are interesting. We will listen to advice from a broad range of people. We take advice from the checker at Wal-mart regarding product. We even listen to advice from people on TV who we really don't know. But following that advice is a different story. At least in the serious matters, we tend to only listen and act on advice from people we truly trust, or those whose thinking just naturally aligns with ours. It is Legacy's desire to establish trust with our foster children as soon as possible. We would very much like them to follow good advice, and that won't generally happen unless they trust us.

Personal Story: When I was 19 years old, I served a mission for my church. Prior to serving as a missionary, I was required to attend the Missionary Training Center. There they taught young missionaries to respect people's personal space, and allow them room to feel comfortable and safe. They explained that all people have an

invisible space around them that they consider their private space. When they are around strangers, their personal space becomes larger, and when they trust people, that space become smaller. They invited us to experiment on this concept. They asked us to find new missionaries that had not attended the class and sit with them in the cafeteria for dinner that evening. They said that we should take items off our food tray and place them outside of the space on the table that would be considered "our space". The infringement should not be significant, but enough to violate their space. I took the challenge. The effects were amazing. I place my milk just over the half way point on the table. The missionary across from me became visible concerned. It bothered him, and he didn't know what to do. Eventually, he used his tray to push my milk onto "my" half of the table. Once this was accomplished he became visibly relieved. I used other items with the people next to me with very similar results. Our culture, like our space, gives us a sense of comfort and safety. When we are afforded the cultural elements that we are used to, we tend to feel at peace.



Personal Space

Establishing a culturally-sensitive needs and services plan: Over the first 30 days in placement, the foster parent, the foster child, and the Legacy social services worker will establish a needs and services plan for the child. There is a tendency in the industry to make these plans generic and somewhat boilerplate. Legacy wants to see these plans culturally-specific and individually-specific. As a foster parent, your input is vital. This plan will help the child deal with issues, goals, and concern. It is a plan for their success. Using this plan, Legacy will help coordinate services and resources for you and the child in placement.

Stabilization: After a child is acclimated into your home, and hopefully feeling safe and comfortable, Legacy intends on emphasizing stability. The acclimation phase of placement is tremendously important, and is the foundation to future success. However, it is during the acclimation phase, which is sometimes called "the honeymoon period," that a child might be withdrawn and reserved. We build trust and understanding to be used in the stabilization phase. During stabilization, we continue to work on trust and we address issues and goals. It is during this phase that the real work begins. During stabilization we are dealing with parenting issues, behaviors and challenges. The better our needs and services plan is, the better our resources and tools will be. During this phase, we must be careful to maintain the child's sense of culture and being.

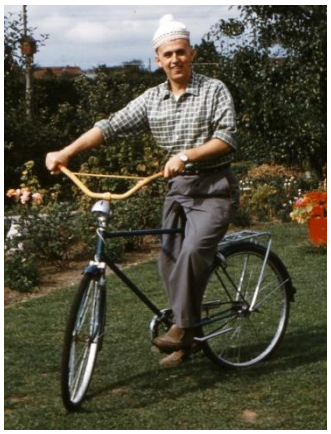
Discharge planning: Oddly enough, discharge planning starts at placement, and is not the end of the process. The child helps with the discharge planning by disclosing their desired outcomes. By establishing these in the beginning, we can work in a culturally-sensitive manner to achieve successful discharges.

Section 6: Identifying your own cultural barriers

To promote a sense of identity and normalcy for the child and to provide for the child's emotional well being and long-term outcomes, it is not only critical that you are sensitive to and honor the unique cultural beliefs and values of the child and his/her family, it is also critical that you are aware of your own cultural beliefs and values so that you may gauge your responses.

When asked about your own cultural or ethnic background, it is not enough to say, "I'm just local," or "I'm just an American." You need to make the effort to do some research into your own heritage; to unravel the history of your ancestors. Find out who they were and what brought you to where you are. When you take interest in your own culture, you'll be more likely to take interest in the ethnic and cultural history of your foster children and their biological family.

Personal Story: I was raised by Danish parents in California. My father had a thick Danish accent and a unique way of doing things. He was not like all the other fathers. Don't get me wrong, he was a great father, but he was definitely different. His name was as different as his culture. He was named Ove (pronounced Ō v ah). At age 19, I moved to Denmark for two years. I found that the name Ove was as common in Denmark as John is in America. I also found an entire society of people like my father. He was not as unique as I once thought. As I lived among the Danish people, I gained a great appreciation for my father, and a love for the culture that I came from. The experience opened my eyes to diversity and great respect for people who are different from me. And yet, I found great connections and understanding about myself.



In order to be culturally-competent, we must recognize the impact that our own cultural lens has on our roles, communication styles, and perceptions. Some of these will be very positive, and we might list them on a strengths column. Some of these might be negative, and identifying them can be a path to correction. For example, let's say I came from a family that dealt with stress by yelling at each other. Perhaps this has become part of my culture. Maybe I yell at anyone that crosses me or doesn't agree with my thinking. Obviously, this is not a productive characteristic. By identifying this cultural element in my character, I can work on changing.

Did you Know?

There are over 190 countries on the planet, with 2,000 languages, 7,000 dialects, 500 ethnicities, and 900 unique cultural traditions.

One of the more interesting tools available to learning about your culture is family history. The more we learn about our ancestors, the more they reveal about us. Commit to learning more about your culture of origins.

Learn to respect families as the primary source for defining needs and priorities. This means that the child's family of origin is most probably the primary source of the child's culture. Don't discard that, no matter what you learn about the family. We tend to make judgment, which

unnecessarily influences decisions. Just because a biological parent has made mistakes, doesn't mean that we should discount or eliminate the families culture from the child's life. Develop skills in cross cultural communication and increase your sensitivity to alienating behaviors. Be prepared to work with children and families in a culturally-diverse, and at times incompetent, world.

Our interpersonal relationships are profoundly influenced by our values. Families, communities, cultural and religious beliefs, educational experiences, and financial status all influence how we think about others. Be careful that your intelligence doesn't supersede doing the right thing.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when evaluating your own cultural barriers:

- How many friends do you have of another race or culture? Other classes / socioeconomic statuses?
- What type of things do you seek to know about other cultures?
- Do you attend multicultural events and celebrations?
- What do you know about specialized skin and hair care for children of color?
- Have you incorporated other races and cultures into your home life?
- Are the schools in your area diverse with children of many cultures?
- What cultures are represented in your church?

- How do your extended family members view people of different races and classes?

Keep in mind that prejudice can be intercultural as well, coming from within the culture or family. Take for example the native Latino man who comments, "That boy works hard, for a Latino," in reference to a younger Latino on his job site. Or the African-American community leader who congratulates his nephew, "Good job at getting your diploma. You are smart for a black man." These are examples of intercultural incompetence. We need to be aware that cultural incompetence is not reserved for those outside of our cultural, but exists within our own cultures as well. Just because you may be fostering a child of similar cultural, ethnic, or racial origin does not mean that you are free from cultural concerns and sensitivities.

We should also be aware that our prejudices are often hidden in our language, in subtle and indirect nuances of speech. Statements like, "What a pretty little black girl." or "That is a well dressed foster child." Are example of hidden prejudices. Even within the culture, expressing these stereotypes can cause considerable hurt.

There are common barriers that prevent us from being culturally-competent. Can you guess what they are?

Write your answers here:

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Your answers may look something like these:

- **Denial:** Your world view is the only one that should exist. Everyone should think like you because your belief system is absolutely correct. You deny and are disinterested in diversity issues. You might tell yourself, "Foster children in my care should simply adapt to how we do things. If they don't get better, that's their fault." This barrier is really based on the premise that your way is perfect and superior to all others. It refuses to consider the value of other ways of thinking and living. It is a prideful view of the world.

  Please use caution here! It is very common in foster homes for foster parents to call and say, "Get this kid out of my home, he (or she) is off the hook!" This is generally a great indication that parents are struggling with the barrier of denial.

- **Unawareness:** You fail to recognize that there are differences. Most of us will see the obvious cultural differences associated with outward appearance and speech. Unfortunately, you might be unaware of the cultural differences associated with belief systems, behaviors, social structure, or thought process. This barrier causes us to ignore significant cultural factors in our relationships.

  Personal Story: When I lived in Denmark, I was unaware of the cultural practices associated with meals. I did not know that a sign to your host that you were done eating was to place your fork, prongs down, next to your knife on your plate in a diagonal fashion. I had just started eating when I inadvertently placed my fork and knife in this diagonal fashion. Much to my surprise, they took my plate, food and all. I was still hungry, but my dinner was abruptly concluded for me (everyone else kept eating). Sometime later I asked someone what had happened. They educated me on the custom,

and I never made that mistake again. Being unaware of the cultures around us can be a barrier to cultural competency.

- **Defensiveness:** You experience your worldview as better than the others, and use stereotyping to defend your view. You may not even be aware of your stereotypes or the subtle messages that make foster children feel uncomfortable (e.g. racial slurs, or negative comments about the child's biological parents, culture, or religion in front of the child). An example of this might be a parent talking on the phone (in range of the child's hearing) saying, "Can you believe his parents are Mormon, no wonder he is so messed up."

- **Minimization:** You know that differences exist but you minimize them, believing that human similarities outweigh the differences. You might tell yourself, "All children are the same and sooner or later this child will come to accept our belief system since it's the best way to live."

- **Indifference:** You recognize cultural difference but set no value upon them. Comments or actions that relate to cultural difference seem unimportant so long as you are providing a safe environment with all the basic needs. This barrier build a false façade that the foster parent is doing a great job, while placing no value on the cultural needs of the children.

  Indifference is also a common barrier for foster parents. I would again stress CAUTION. Well-meaning foster parents will express that they cloth the child exceptionally well, and the child's room is beautiful. The child may have all the amenities on the world, and yet they can't understand why things aren't working out. Most of the time it is because there was an indifference to the child's cultural needs. Caring for a child is more than just the things we buy.

Section 7: Removing personal barriers to sensitivity and proper behavior

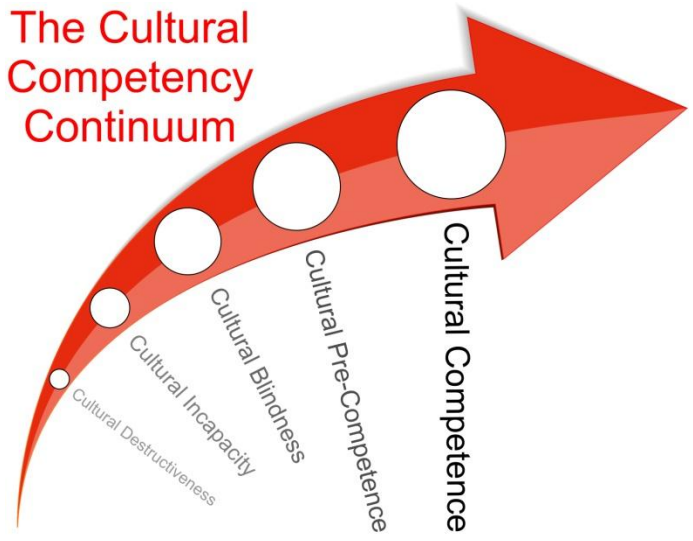
Cultural competence is a process and does not happen overnight. Receiving training will not solve cultural barriers. Training is only a piece of the puzzle. Breaking through stereotypes and bias is a complex and difficult process, but one that leads to positive change for the people and the community. People and systems move along a continuum of competence.

According to researchers, there are five progressive steps along the continuum to becoming culturally competent. These include;

- **Removing Cultural Destructiveness** – This is the most negative of the continuum and is characterized by attitudes, policies, and practices that are destructive to cultures and consequently to individuals within the culture. This attitude, and subsequent actions, results in things like segregation, refusal to allow language accommodations, a caste system, refusal of educational opportunities, genocide, and even slavery. This attitude is generally intentional.

- **Removing Cultural Incapacity** – This is when a system doesn't intentionally seek to be culturally destructive but lacks the capacity to help minority clients or communities because of biased beliefs. This state of being results in things like not providing bilingual services when needed, coming to inappropriate conclusions because of biased views of the world, or the inability to understand and feel compassion because of extreme bias.

- **Removing Cultural Blindness** – This is the midpoint in the continuum. It is characterized by the belief that service or helping approaches traditionally used by the dominant culture are universally applicable, regardless of race or culture. These services ignore cultural strengths and encourage assimilation. This attitude results in treating everyone the same, regardless of their cultural background. It is evident in standardized testing practices, and in the products and services we sell; for example "flesh" colored band-aids being only the skin tone of Caucasians.



- **Cultural Pre-Competence** – Moving towards the more positive end of the continuum, where systems and individuals are making efforts to improve and where there is a desire to provide quality services and a commitment to diversity. This level lacks the information on how to maximize these capacities and can lead to tokenism. This attitude results in hiring minority staff and leadership that represent the community being served. It results in

waiting rooms that reflect the culture of the populations through pictures, magazines, and music. It results in ongoing training and learning about the cultures around us.

- **Cultural Competence** – This attitude is characterized by acceptance and respect for differences, continuing self-assessment, careful attention to the dynamics of difference, continuous expansion of knowledge and resources, and adaption of services to better meet the needs of diverse populations. It is evident in diversified professional and management staff. It involves the community in the development of activities and service decisions. It encourages diverse community representation in the workshops and trainings it is involved with. This attitude gives continual, sincere thought to the needs of all the cultures it touches.

Overcoming our barriers to cultural competency takes intentional and consistent effort. Our brains work in funny ways to support our beliefs. Once we learn a stereotype, we are more likely to attend to and recall events that are consistent with these beliefs, rather than events that would disconfirm them. We dismiss events that don't fit our worldview.

Suppose you have a stereotype that Caucasian children are talkative and you meet a Caucasian child who is quiet. You might 'notice' that the child is not feeling well. You have dismissed or distorted the experience; otherwise you would have to rewrite your script of what Caucasian children are like. The same is true for stereotypes that suggest other ethnicities are lazy or stupid.

The only way to change the stereotypes you have about groups of people is to rewrite your script every time you see evidence that disconfirms your prejudice. It takes a good deal of mental effort, but is well worth it. It's like cleaning the screen on you TV; the program is the same, but you see everything more clearly. Only then can you experience the joy of seeing children as they truly are.

Did you know?

In personality development, the self-fulfilling prophecy is very real. In a well-documented study, elementary school teachers were told on the first day of school that certain students were 'intellectual bloomers.' By the end of the year, these randomly assigned students had gained an average of 10 IQ points more than the students who were arbitrary labeled as 'intellectually-challenged.'

Section 8: Complacency is often a barrier to cultural understanding and care

To help a child maintain a sense of identity and normalcy, to effectively communicate and connect with the child and to help him/her heal, you must become culturally-competent in terms of that child and his/her family.

What are some ways that you can be culturally-competent with a child whose culture seems quite foreign to you?

Write your answers here:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Here are some possible answers:

- Seek out mentors within your child's culture – for yourself and for your child.
- Network with other foster parents who may have similar experience.
- Communicate with your Legacy social services worker and ask for help.
- Stand up to racism and discrimination. Have a no tolerance policy for it.
- Go to places where your child is surrounded by people of his/her same race and culture.

Having experience in fostering has tremendous benefits, however, there are pitfalls to experience. Parents who have been providing foster care for a while may develop a false sense of confidence. They may think that because they have had multiple foster children, they know them all. Research shows that the longer foster parents provide care, the easier it is for them to overlook unique cultural nuances, especially with children of diverse cultural or religious traditions. Additionally, they might start to categorize children because they remind them of another with whom they provided care. They might not take the time to discover the new child's uniqueness.

The key is to stay fresh, ask questions, and keep an open mind. Remain open to being surprised and allow each child to teach you about his or her unique reality. Remember, culture is complex and has many dimensions, and diversity is more than ethnicity. Religion may standout more in

your foster child's reality than ethnicity. In some, the geographic area of where your foster child was born may bring greater pride to them than their racial classification. A Caucasian foster child, for example, may have specific ethnic roots but have never had the opportunity to share it because the team has intuitively grouped the child with other Caucasians.

It's important to build confidence in caring for diverse youth but it is also important to guard against overconfidence, as this can lead to a kind of stereotyping as well. The cultural and professional knowledge you develop can become no more than props on a stage of which the child is the lead actor. Remember that they write their own script and use the props in ways that makes sense to them. Part of our job as caregivers is to acknowledge that the stage exists, help set the stage, and then know which cultural props to put out, when, and under what circumstances.

Section 9: Do all members of your family share in this understanding?

It is extremely challenging to do the work of fostering alone; yet if you are doing it with a partner (spouse, friend, older child, parent) that is not on the same page, then it can be even more difficult. Being on the same page with your partner in disciplining your foster child is more important than the disciplining strategy itself.

All adult caregivers in your home should come to consensus on basic family matters. The list is long, and can include use of the phone, amount of TV or play time, where and when meals are eaten, the time for lights out, policies on sleepovers and/or dating, household responsibilities like chores, rules about swearing, and so on. Be clear in setting boundaries. In regard to swearing, for example, you and your foster child might not even agree on what constitutes a swear word.

Similarly, all adult caregivers should also be sensitive to issues of diversity and agree on strategies used to strengthen the child's cultural or social identity. Anything short of this could undermine your efforts to create a home environment that validates the child's cultural identity and self worth.

Do you have rules and guidelines for your home that promote unity and understanding? If yes, what are they? If no, what are some that you might put in place?

Write your answers here:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Here are some possible answers:

- We keep private information private.
- We treat everyone in the family with dignity and respect, no matter what.
- We don't swear.
- We don't talk bad about other races.
- We have gratitude, and thank other for the things they do.

Section 10: Forgotten aspects of culture: sexual orientation, religion…

This will be a difficult section for some people. I was raised in an age when parents didn't talk to kids about sex or religion. They were somewhat taboo topics. Today, they are subjects or political arguments and public debate. Our kids do not need to be brought into these debates. They need to be loved and respected. They are trying to find their place in this world and establish their personal identity. Foster children, especially, are at a great disadvantage. They do not need our judgment or self-righteous rhetoric. They just need love. That being said, we need not be scared if a child has decided to have a different sexual orientation or believe in a religion that we might see as a cult. They will become successful, productive adults with the proper parental support. Let's look at these two seeming taboo subjects.

Sexual Orientation

In the year 2011, the United States government reported that there were approximately 175,000 youth ages 10 to 18 in foster care in the United States. Of these youth, an estimated 5 to 10 percent – and likely more – are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQQI).

Frankly speaking, there are many families whose culture is opposed to non-traditional sexuality/ orientation/gender. Being culturally-competent does not require that you change your religious beliefs or cultural teachings. It requires that you are sensitive to other people's cultural uniqueness, especially when they differ from yours. This includes sexual orientation.

Many cultures have developed unhealthy stereotypes of non-traditional sexuality/orientations/genders. It is our job to provide a safe, healthy environment for our children.

As a foster parent, what can you do to prepare yourself to be an effective provider to a child who is considering their own sexuality/orientation/gender identity?

Write your answers here:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Your answers may include things like:

- Honestly evaluate your feelings towards the LGBTQQI community.
- Consider the negative impact your feelings might have on children. Consider your body language, tone of voice, questions asked or avoided, and care you might give to children who have a non-traditional sexuality/orientation/gender.

- Educate yourself, learn about the specific issues facing children as they consider their own sexuality/orientation/gender identity.

- Be accessible to the children in your care, and be willing to have appropriate discussion about sexuality/orientation/gender.

- Make sure that the children in your care know and understand that they are in a safe place to discuss sexuality/orientation/gender.

- Be comfortable discussing sexuality/orientation/gender. This means that you must be familiar with the issues that children face as they consider their own sexuality/orientation/gender.

- Be sensitive to the fact that it is often very difficult for a child to disclose non-traditional sexuality/orientation/gender. They make be scared of judgment, retribution, consequences, loss of placement, loss of love, etc.

- Know your resources. Familiarize yourself with healthy and appropriate community resources, and utilize them properly.

- Respect their confidentiality.

- Don't assume that all the children placed in your home will be "straight". Many children may have never revealed their sexuality/orientation/gender to anyone, ever.

- Don't assume a child's sexual identity based on their behavior.

- Conversely, don't assume a specific sexual behavior based on sexual identity. Quite often bad stereotypes have been developed. For instance; "The child is gay, so he is going to act out sexually with my other children of the same gender." This would be the same as saying, "The child is straight, so he is going to act out sexually with my children of the opposite gender." These are inappropriate attitudes.

- Don't assume that transgender children are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Religion

Participants in cross-cultural presentations often ask how to separate an individual's cultural beliefs and behaviors from those that are based on the person's religion. The best answer to this very complex question is to think of culture and religion as being two sides of the same coin – it may not be very useful to struggle with separating them (unless you are a theologian or philosopher). When interacting with people and their families, religion can be a touchy subject. As foster parents, we need to be aware of significant areas of religious belief that must be respected. Here are a few to consider:

- **Worship**: Children need to be allowed communication with spiritual leaders, youth groups, and services.

- **Gender:** It is ethically egregious not to be aware of gender-specific rules for children that are extremely important in many faith traditions – for example, among Orthodox Jews and Muslims, it may be forbidden to be touched by someone of the opposite gender. Male Muslims should be examined by men and only female nurses and doctors should examine Muslim women.

- **Modesty:** Many religions prescribe to a dress code, Mormon's encourage women not to wear clothes that are sleeveless or too short. We need to respect these beliefs when we buy their clothing.

- **Diet:** Concerns about dietary restrictions are most important General awareness of food taboos predicated by culture/religion is important . For example, if a Hindu child is vegetarian. Some do eat meat, but do NOT eat pork or beef. Eggs may not be allowed. Hindus and Muslims may both observe strict fasting. Mormons follow a dietary code that prohibits tea, coffee, and cola drinks. It is not as important to try to memorize specific dietary rules as it is to understand something about the beliefs driving the rules. For example, where fasting is practiced, it is related to a widely-held belief that physical cleansing is associated with spiritual cleansing.

- **Sacred objects**: Be they amulets, figurines, portraits of saints, crosses, intaglios – sacred object should be allowed in a child's physical space and on the body. All caution should be taken to safeguard them. They should not be denied, removed (or even moved) without talking with the child. Evil eye pendants or charms are common worldwide. In Mexico they are very common, and should never be removed, especially from babies, without permission of family members. Similarly, Sikhs wear a steel bracelet on the right wrist that – like a wedding ring – should not be removed unless absolutely necessary. Called a Kara, this bracelet is a symbol of unbreakable attachment to God. It is in the shape of a circle which has no beginning and no end.

- **Sacred Time:** In our Dimensions of Culture trainings we talk a great deal about how people's concepts of time vary by culture. In addition to differences between clock time and "fluid" time, health care providers should be aware of sacred time. What day does the patient and family observe as a day of rest? It is Friday for Muslims, Friday at sunset until Saturday at sunset for Jews and Seventh-day Adventists, and Sunday for Christians. Meetings with families should not be scheduled on these dates, and office appointments should be offered on days other than sacred days. Clergy within certain faith traditions can provide the dates for holidays, like Ramadan, that shift year-to-year.

- **Health Care:** Certain religions have health care guidelines. Decisions on health care should be respected after consultation with the county social worker.

Section 11: The things we say and how we say them

Words matter! They say that it is not what we say, but how we say it. I would argue that it is both. Kids hear everything we say. They hear from the other room, or when we think we are having a private conversation. It may not even look like they are paying attention. I would give a world of caution and advice. BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY.

Often we are put on the spot, in public settings, by friends who asked sometime inappropriate or insensitive questions. You should be prepared as to how you might answer them. Here are some examples:

- **Where's your child's real mom?**

  Sample Responses:

  - "That's personal and we don't share that."
  - "His parent love him very much."

Did you know?

Researchers studying the use of praise have found that in order to balance the negativity children face on a daily basis, they need to hear six praise statements for every one of criticism.

- **Why is he (the foster child) in foster care?**

  Sample Responses:

  - "He is staying with our family for right now"
  - "He just needed to live in a safe place for right now."
  - "He is member of our family for right now."

- **Where did you get him?**

  Sample Responses:

  - "Anthony is from Arvin."
  - "Anthony is a member of our family for right now."
  - "This isn't the place to discuss that…."

- **She is so lucky to have been fostered by you.**

  Sample Responses:

  - "We are the lucky ones to have her in our lives. We love her so much."

- **Do you have any children of your own?**

  Sample Responses:

- "Just these!"
- "I consider all the children in my home as my own."

- **Are they really brothers and sisters?**

  Sample Responses:

  - "We're really their parents and they are really brothers and sisters."
  - "We're a real family…no imaginary family members here."

- **How could his parents have abandoned such a sweet little boy?**

  Sample Responses:

  - "His parents love him, and are allowing him to stay with us while they works some things out."
  - "He is not abandoned, he is part of our family right now."

- **What do you know about her real parents?**

  Sample Responses:

  - "She doesn't have fake parents. You mean her birth family, that's private. I'm real and I am happy to talk to you more about foster parenting."
  - "I'm not comfortable sharing such personal information."

Section 12: How do you determine what cultural elements matter?

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, evidence shows that children of all races are equally as likely to suffer from abuse and neglect, but children of color, especially African American children, are more likely to enter and remain in foster care.

A higher rate of poverty and challenges in accessing support services, as well as racial bias or cultural misunderstanding and difficulties in finding appropriate permanent homes, were identified as the main factors influencing the proportion of African American children in foster care.

As a society and as an organization, we have an obligation to look at these type of trends and address them. But what is your obligation as a foster parent? Your job is to identify the specific cultural needs that are important to each child individually, and those that will have the greatest positive impact, and focus there. To do this, you will have to learn their story. You will have to create an environment where they will feel safe sharing, and then you will need to return that trust by acting in a safe and confidential fashion. Sometimes, a behavior is an indication that there is a significant cultural element for you to investigate.

Personal Story: I have a close friend who grew up in poor circumstances. Her parents divorced after multiple affairs, years of fighting, and economic struggles. When her parents divorced, they sat her down and explained that they could no longer afford to care for her, and that she needed to get a job to pay for the things she needed. Consequently, at 11 years of age, she hired on to deliver two separate paper routes at 5am. After school, she spent time collecting fees from the customers. This money was used to buy personal hygiene supplies, and often food for her and her three younger brothers. Food was often so scarce that it was common place for the children to hide the little food they had in various places throughout the house. They often buried money, mostly change, in mason jars in the backyard. Years later, my friend got married. The circumstances of her life were much better, and yet her husband would often find jars of "snacks" hidden in odd locations throughout the house.

My friend, through trusting relationships, was able to move beyond these behaviors. Even so, some cultural attributes are ever present. Racial and cultural bias seem to be all around us. These elements are sometimes very difficult to work through.

As a foster parent, in addition to becoming culturally-competent and being sensitive to and honoring the cultural background of your foster child, How can you help address racial disproportionality and cultural bias?

Write your answers here:

Your answers may include things like:

- Coparenting and involving the biological parent in the decision-making process for the child.
- Supporting efforts for reunification and permanency.
- Advocating for the child and family.
- Where appropriate, mentoring the biological parents.

Section 13: Answer questions about differences

Talking about race and ethnicity can be uncomfortable. It is necessary, especially if we want to help youth develop their racial and ethnic identity. They also need to know how to deal with racial and ethnic issues in a productive and healthy fashion. Racial and ethnic identity work can and should be integrated into day-to-day work with a child, including the care of a child. It is not something that can be adequately addressed in one or two conversations with youth.

Over time, asking appropriate questions about a child and their culture will give you great insight into them.

What kinds of questions might be helpful to ask when getting to know a child? Which one will help you understand their unique culture?

Write your answers here:

Your answers may include question like:

- What kinds of foods are you used to eating?
- Have you ever helped preparing meals?
- Have you ever had chores?
- What kinds of things do you do for fun?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- How do you like your hair cared for?
- Are you used to baths or showers? When are you used to taking them?
- Do you go to church? Where? How often?
- What time are you used to getting up in the morning?
- Do you have a pet? Have you every cared for one?
- What time are you used to going to bed?
- Do you like to sleep with all the lights off?
- Do you have a bed time ritual? Stories, prayers, milk and cookies?
- Do you have any special/best friends?

There will be placements in which your foster child does not look like you. This may cause some anxiety in your foster child, especially around peers. Prepare your foster child to answer questions about race differences in ways that make sense to him or her. Having ready-made answers is not about being phony, it's about keeping information private so that other kids don't use the information to tease or harass. For example, some foster children choose to refer to their foster parents as "mom and dad" while at school, even if they don't call their foster parents "mom and dad" at home. Let your foster child know that this is okay. Another option is referring to you as "auntie or uncle". If your foster child's birth parent(s) is/are in prison, teach them to say, "My mom/dad is unable to come to visit right now," or "My mom/dad is out of town." As long as your foster child understands the truth there is no harm in keeping this information within your family.

Also, think twice about introducing your foster child as "my foster child." It could make your foster child feel inferior, as if they are not considered part of the family. "This is my daughter/son or my nephew/niece, and he lives with us," is a better introduction. If they respond, "But he doesn't look like you," tell them, "You're right, he's better looking!" Be ready for the people out there who are naive or lack basic consideration. Remember that the concept of family is not limited to biological ties or whether or not people look the same within a family. Love is the primary prerequisite; in time it will transcend all differences.

Section 14: Communication in an open safe environment

One of the things I liked about my father was that he always asked me to help him in the garage or in the yard. When we worked there we were typically alone. We would talk about anything and everything. He often let me lead the way. This gave me an opportunity to speak privately about things that bothered me. He never ran and told my mother or siblings. He also never judged me. When my thinking was off and he felt like he needed to correct me, he generally led me to my own correct conclusion. I could always share with him, because I knew it was safe. He would never laugh at me, or call my ideas stupid.

This is the type of setting we need for culturally-sensitive and competent homes. Children need to be:

- Communicated to honestly.
- They need to have clear expectations and appropriate consequences.
- They need to be able to share without fear of retribution or reprisal.
- They need to know that the things they say will be kept confidential.
- They need to know that you love them.
- Sometimes they just need to talk.
- They need time away from the other listening ears in the house. Make sure that each child gets special time to communicate.

FAMILY SERVICES

Legacy

A FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY