

PRINCIPLE 2:

The cultural groups represented in the communities and families of each Head Start program are the primary sources for culturally relevant programming.



Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Families and community groups can provide accurate information.
- Culturally relevant program systems and services enhance children's learning.
- Programs must take into account issues relevant to all cultural groups within their service area.

Research Review

Culture is the context in which children develop. It is also the context in which parents raise their children. Parents use their knowledge of children's development and caregiving—learned from their personal experiences and their cultural communities—to make decisions about their caregiving practices (Rogoff 2003).

One area in which the impact of culture cannot be understated, and in which culturally relevant programming is very important, is health. Decisions about co-sleeping, hygiene, or personal care; when to seek medical care; the types of food children eat and how the food is prepared and served; feeding patterns; causes of illness; taking Medicaid; and the use of home and folk remedies are affected by culture and must be understood by service providers so that effective care and support are given to the family (Lipson & Dibble 2005).

Culture is closely involved in how children develop and learn. Children enrolled in Head Start programs receive cultural information from their parents and their teachers, home visitors, and other Head Start staff, as well as from other members of their community. Programs for young children that do not take into account issues of culture thereby miss important information about the foundations of a child's development. Program staff who study and reflect on the relevance of culture are better able to support effectively children's ongoing learning and development.

Key Implications

Programs that actively embrace learning *from* families provide the most effective support for children's development. They can integrate classroom environments, materials, activities, and other practice, or program services, with a child's knowledge and experience. This "matching" becomes a base from which a child can acquire knowledge of a second culture. The major implication of such support is the need for Head Start programs to learn about the children and families enrolled in their program from the families themselves. It is only then that programs can develop meaningful partnerships with parents in which everyone is working together to ensure that children gain optimal benefits from their Head Start experience.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

Conversation Starters

An Early Head Start program in Virginia has developed a process for learning from families that links the program's long-range goals with specific practices intended to achieve goals for interactions with families. The program's long-range goals include the following:

- understanding the cultures of all families enrolled in the program;
- making all families feel welcome in the classroom; and
- integrating all of the cultures of families with children in the classroom.

To achieve these and other goals, the program has developed a practice it refers to as Conversation Starters. Through this practice, the teachers find specific and consistent ways to approach parents as they enroll their children in the program. Conversation Starters is aimed at initiating positive long-term relationships with the family. Teachers ask parents how and what words they use to comfort their child when he or she is upset . . . as well as ways they encourage their child. This enables the teacher to understand an important aspect of the parents' practices and, by extension, to understand how the child is cared for in the home. In addition, the practice enables the teacher to learn—and then to use—one or more familiar words in the child's home language.

As the teacher makes additional contact with the parent, the teacher has the opportunity to share instances in which the child was comforted or encouraged in the classroom. This provides continuity to the parent-teacher communication, and opens the potential for more significant communication to occur in the future.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. How could you incorporate Conversation Starters into your program? Would you begin by asking parents about how they comfort their child in the home language, or would you ask another question?
2. How could you use Conversation Starters in your program with English-speaking parents? How could you go beyond the initial question(s) asked at the beginning of the program year in order to develop a deeper relationship?
3. How might you extend the use of Conversation Starters in your program? For example, how might different staff (e.g., teachers, home visitors, family service staff, administrators) use the practice in complementary ways? How might staff work together to share information they receive from families over time?
4. How might Conversation Starters be used in the family partnership agreement process?
5. How are families invited to share aspects of their culture(s) with other parents and children in classrooms, during socialization times, during other program activities, or in other settings?
6. How can you represent the families' home lives in the classroom/socialization space so that all families feel welcome and valued?