

Your Child's Broader World: Culture, Race, and Diversity

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Connecting your Child with a Cultural Identity

Identifying your culture and cultural values

Reflect on your cultural identity and what about it feels important to you. If you are parenting with a partner, encourage them to do the same, and then you can work together on common goals.

- What is your cultural background? (Like a fish trying to describe water, the first step of connecting to cultural identity may be for you to figure out what that identity is! For example, mine includes growing up in Wyoming, military family and jello at Methodist church potlucks.)
- How might that be the same or different from other people in your child's community?
- What are some of your culture's values that resonate with you? (e.g. "Leave places cleaner than you found them.") Are there other values or attitudes that no longer suit you?
- What things in your life have helped you connect to your cultural identity?
- What traditions or rituals do you want to continue to follow?

Talking with other people about their culture, or reading books or watching shows from diverse cultures, can help you to understand your own better, as you realize how different cultures can be.

Beginning to talk about culture

We don't have to wait till children are "old enough" to understand culture to begin talking about it. Like everything else in their lives, from food to self care, we can talk from the beginning about all the things they experience and trust that their understanding of it will grow and deepen as they get older.

Young children are very concrete. They learn through hands-on experience, and through observing the important people in their lives. They don't really learn through abstract conversations about ideas. They also learn through repetition, so as you begin to think about what parts of your cultural identity and values you want to reinforce, keep that in mind.

Culture: Routines, Rituals, and Traditions

For a young child, life often seems unpredictable. Routines create a reassuring sense of structure – the more they know what is coming next, the more manageable life seems. They gain from daily routines the sense 'this is how my family does things.' Ritual and traditions take that to the next level: 'this is how my people do things and how we have done things for a very long time'. From annual traditions, they gain a sense of how time passes, bringing change but also familiar touchpoints.

Some places to consider adding rituals or traditions:

- Daily: How do you begin your days together? What are mealtimes like? What is the typical rhythm of the day? Do you go outside every day? What's the bedtime routine? (Stories? Prayers? Gratitudes?)
- Weekly: Could you do "family date nights"? Weekly dinners with extended family or friends?
- Holidays: Which do you celebrate? How do you celebrate? Decorations? Foods? Gifts?
- Special occasions: For example, does the tooth fairy come to your house?
- Other family traditions: Do you have nicknames or family in-jokes or songs?

Some ways to include cultural identity in your child's life:

- Tell stories. About your childhood, how your family did things, their grandparents' childhoods.
- Read books about your culture, listen to traditional music from your culture or music your parents played when you were young, eat foods that were traditional where you were raised.
- Learn and teach the language of your culture.
- Go to religious services or cultural festivals.
- Make scrapbooks with info about your family: a family tree, photographs, and documents of your family's journey. Tell stories of resilience – how you weathered hard times together.

Development of Awareness of Race and Cultural Differences

It's important to know how young children's cognitive abilities develop. It can help you decide what you should be talking about and what activities to do with your child at each stage. Here are some general benchmarks that show how young children develop racial and cultural identity and attitudes. These lists describe average development – all children develop at their own pace.

Infants and Young Toddlers:

Infants are working on the basics of self-awareness and a separate identity from their caregivers: sorting out "what's me" and "what's not." As young as six months, they notice differences in skin color, and will gaze longer at a face that is different from their parents' face. By age two, they may comment on different skin colors. They may notice these differences more than gender differences.

Two- and three-year-olds:

Can begin to describe themselves and their abilities. Become more aware of how people look, notice differences between boys and girls, skin color, hair color, eye shapes, weight, disabilities, size... May be curious about differences, or may be fearful of those who look different than their family looks.

Three- and four-year-olds:

Start using labels. Better able to describe themselves. Notice difference more – they start asking (loudly), "Mama, why is that person___?" May show preferences for children who are like them. May want to know why there are different races, or how they got their skin color. They understand they get bigger as they get older, they may wonder if other things change– gender, skin color, and so on.

Kindergarten:

Continue to ask questions about differences. Start noticing the differences between members of an ethnic group, such as the wide range of skin tones amongst people we call "Black". Can identify which ethnic group they belong to. More aware of family culture. Can begin to develop prejudices.

Learning About Cultural Differences

In the books you read and the videos you watch, consider seeking out "mirrors and windows." Mirrors are stories where the characters look like your family and have similar life experiences. Seeing themselves in stories helps to strengthen a healthy cultural identity. Windows tell the stories of people who look different and have different life experiences. These stories cultivate an appreciation of diversity and empathy for others. Find recommendations for books and videos at:

<https://gooddayswithkids.com/2023/11/13/examples-of-diverse-books/>