PSP LearningHub

Foundations of Culture

A connection to culture allows a child or young person (child) to build a strong sense of cultural identity that sees them growing into resilient adults, especially if they have had adverse experiences. Keeping a child connected to their family, kin and community is a critical part of keeping them connected to culture. Working with family will help you both understand a child's cultural needs and help keep the child connected to their culture. Weaving culture and identity throughout your casework and case planning with children, and the people who care for and make decisions for them, will help children grow up strong and proud.

This factsheet will provide you with a foundational knowledge of children's culture and its role in your work in the Permanency Support Program (PSP). This factsheet is to be read in conjunction with Foundations of Identity.

What is Culture?

Culture encompasses the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, including language, values, religion, roles, customs, communication, social habits, family and community structures, food, music, and arts.

For children in PSP acknowledging, nurturing, and respecting their culture is vital no matter what their permanency goal is. In your casework with children, you explore and support a child's external (visible) and internal (invisible) cultural characteristics and knowledge. Visible cultural attributes include behaviours, practices, and appearance while internal characteristics include personality, expectations, and belief systems.

A child's relationship to culture must be understood through both visible and invisible characteristics to gain a complete understanding. Through this, you can understand what culture means to a child and where you need to make efforts to support their culture.

Culture is a lived experience and taught through connection and role modelling. Children and families are their experts in their own lives so it is important that you have meaningful conversations with them about their culture Through a culturally sensitive approach, you can better walk alongside the child and their family in their journey towards permanency.

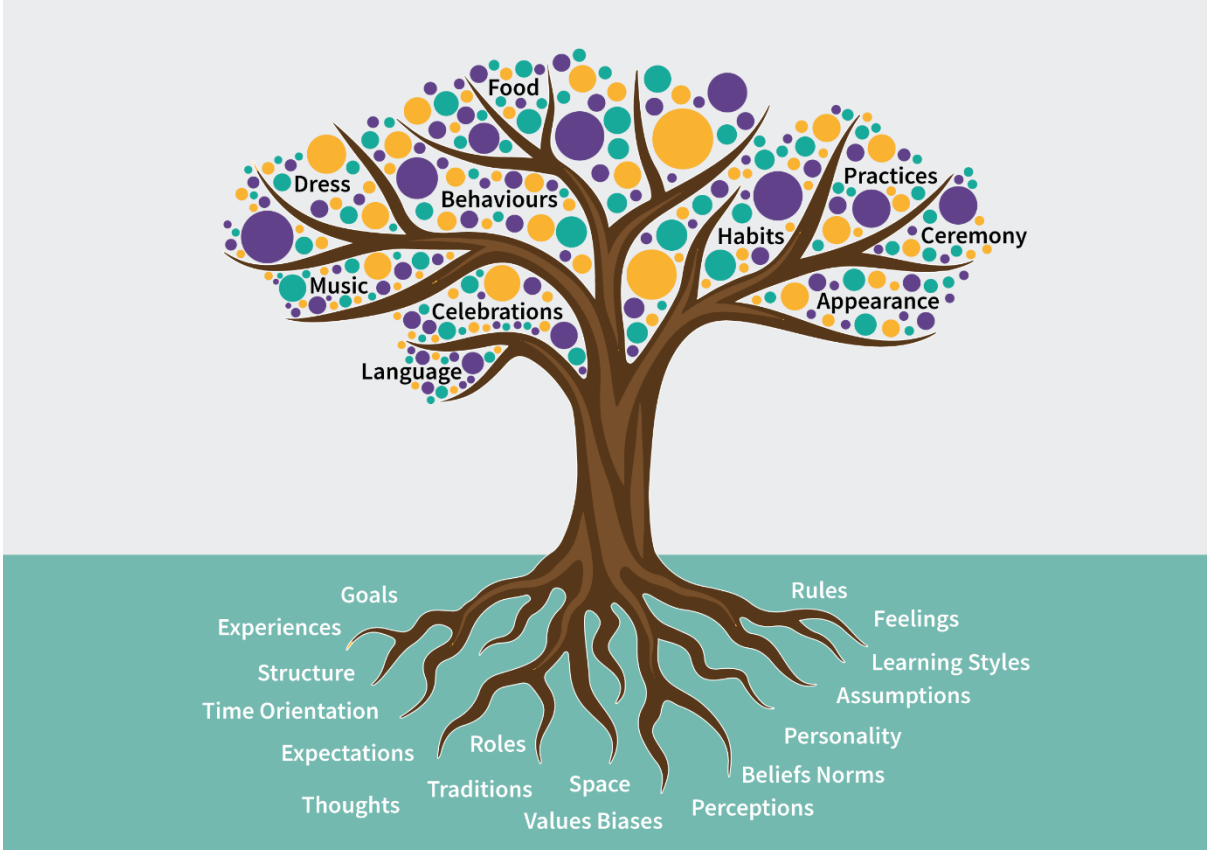

Diagram 1: children's visible and invisible cultural characteristics and knowledge.

Family connections and positive family time are critical to understanding culture.

Understanding the Difference Between Collective and Individualistic Cultures

One way of understanding different cultures is looking at whether they are individualist or collectivist. In general, individualist cultures value independence and individual rights (e.g., Western culture) while collectivist cultures value what is best for the group (e.g., Aboriginal, African, Asian, and South American cultures). Neither system is right or wrong – they simply have different priorities. It is important to remember that you understand that any culture has its differences, strengths, and weaknesses and that you need to be able to work positively with children and families from any background.

Individualistic cultures

- prefer children and families to be more independent in their identity
- focus on self-reliance, autonomy, and uniqueness
- children and families are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate family
- limited obligation to the larger community
- more flexibility in social networks especially with those who are not kin.

The dominant culture in Australia is individualistic. This means that society and the system you work in has a bias towards individualist understanding. For example, PSP caseworkers have a focus on the individual child. For Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children there is an added focus, which is their connection to family, community, and country.

Collectivist cultures

- prefer community-based structure
- children are “raised by a village” – relatives and non-blood relatives who share the same values and traditions and may have particular roles in raising children
- focus on loyalty, social cooperation and putting the interests of the group first
- being helpful to others is of greater importance and provides protection
- challenges or problems are resolved within their culture or community.

If a child were to be raised outside this environment, this could be considered shameful to the child, their parents and community. For a child in PSP this means that they may experience confusion or isolation if they are cut off from their culture. This disconnection has an impact on their sense of identity, self-concept, and self-esteem.

Framework for Supporting Culture and Identity

PSP casework is guided by the NSW Child Standards for Permanent Care. Standard 4 of the NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care requires that children and young people have a positive sense of identity. It also states that children and young people have access to information and experiences which assist them to develop a positive sense of identity.

The Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 relates specifically to the identity for children. The Act requires that all actions and decisions that significantly affect a child must consider the culture, disability, language, religion and sexuality of the child

and, if relevant, those with parental responsibility for the child (s9(c)). It also requires that, in the case where a child is removed for their safety, their name, identity, language and cultural/religious ties should be, as far as possible, preserved (s9(e)).

Cultural permanency is described as children maintaining an ongoing connection to culture through taking part in cultural practices, remaining in community and learning and understanding beliefs, values and stories. For Aboriginal children, remaining on country and being raised by family or kin, where this is possible and, in the child's best interests, is of fundamental importance.

Family Connection and Culture for Children in Out-of-Home Care

Culture and identity for children is rooted in time spent with family. For children who are living with non-relative carers or kin from one side of the family, it is imperative that you support the child to develop their cultural identity which in turn develops their individual and collective identity. When children are living with carers of a different culture to their own, they do not have as much opportunity to develop cultural values and practices as children living with family have a lived experience of culture.

For example, Vietnamese culture values family and cohesion. Vietnamese families consist of extended relatives including aunts, uncles, and grandparents who are the support system for a child. Family challenges are generally resolved within the family. A child from a Vietnamese family may benefit from being cared for by another Vietnamese family who can help them maintain fundamental links to family, community, religion, language, and culture. Access to culture and heritage from their birth family will allow the child to honour and show their loyalty to their culture. This familiarity can help a child's relationship with their carers and help them reconnect with their birth family.

It is important to remember the diversity within cultures and to speak with individual family members to understand the nuances of their family. For example, families with a Lebanese background might follow different religions or denominations, come from different ethnic groups, have different education, or English proficiency, and different values in terms of tradition or change.

While there are similarities between people from the same culture, remember to explore differences and their individual experience of culture as well.

For more information see Foundations of Family Time (Contact) and Family Time (Contact) - Practice Tips.

What is Culturally Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice is a key component in PSP casework to continually improve practice. Culturally reflective practice means ensuring culture is a part of your critical reflection on your work with children, families, and carers.

See Reflective Practice for further information.

Working with cultures different to your own can be challenging and requires deep reflection to ensure positive, unbiased casework. For example, the clash between collective and individualistic cultures may result in miscommunication, and biased expectations between you and the children, parents, carers, and community you work with.

If casework staff in PSP are not aware of such differences, it may unfairly influence decision making around parenting practices, education, health, and permanency. The main challenges you may experience in working with different cultures is around decision making, social comparison and engagement and these must be included within culturally reflective practice.

Culturally reflective practice requires you to:

- be critically aware of yourself including family, identity, role, personal and cultural values, and motivation
- be aware of your values including humility, respect, reciprocity, trust, authenticity and genuineness
- be aware of and challenge your own biases, using colleagues and supervision to help you
- develop knowledge of cultures including differing worldviews, protocols, history and experiences, languages, social justice, human rights, and cultural safety
- have skills to be able to engage, build rapport and build relationships including truly listening, empathy, observation, reflection, language and communication
- seek out cultural consultations with colleagues or other experts and incorporate their insights into your casework

- collaborate with colleagues and clients to ensure your work is informed by a diversity of viewpoints.

Information to Support Culturally Reflective Practice

In collectivist cultures, children are seen as embedded within their group identity. This means that decision making often happens within a family as part of a community, and children look to and respect the advice of Elders or other people with leadership roles in the community. In individualistic cultures parents discuss their decisions making with their children. To achieve permanency for a child it is important to ensure cultural norms and practices are respected and valued. This is good practice regardless of whether a child identifies with a collective or individualistic culture.

You must also consider cultural norms, such as physical appearance (body types, physical appearances, or physical disabilities) and social comparison. Especially in collective cultures, a child represents family, extended family, and the community as a whole. It is not uncommon for child to have to conform to group norms. Standing out in a way that reflects poorly on their community, or causes the community to 'lose face', may lead to intense feelings of shame for both the child, their family and community.

For example, a child who has been diagnosed with cerebral palsy or hearing loss may deviate too far from the cultural norm of their birth family. Different cultures have different understanding of disability and may use different words or concepts to discuss it. You may experience challenges in discussing a child's disabilities with the parents, family, and community members. To avoid shame, they may say they commit to a case plan but disengage. As a result, progress towards case goals can be slow or parent/s and other may not take part in family time. They may also have different ways of managing difference. For example, a western response may be to get all the help for a child's disability that they can, so they can fit in to mainstream culture. Another culture may just accept the child as they are and live with and manage any challenges that brings.

Other things to consider when interacting with children, parents, family, and communities is the way you engage with them. Every culture has their own norms and practices in terms of eye contact, touch, compliments, beliefs systems, healthcare practices, personal space, and modesty (Ferwerda, 2016 in Ausmed, 2019). PSP casework staff must stay informed about these different cultural norms. Asking families their preferences, noticing their reactions and consulting with colleagues or community groups from a similar culture will help you with this.

You can find information on cultural norms and practices on the SBS Cultural Atlas Website or through consultation with colleagues or other services. Depending on the situation, you can also respectfully approach families with questions.

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