Cultural Competence in Child Welfare Services

Caseworker Readiness Worksheet

To become culturally competent, we must first understand the terms we use. The Ohio Child Welfare Training Program (OCWTP) uses the following definitions:

- **Culture** is a system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and standards of behavior that govern the organization of people into social groups and regulate both individual and group behavior. It is adaptive; created by groups of individuals and incorporated into group life to assure the survival and well-being of the group’s members.

- **Cultural values** are the shared principles or ideals that provide the foundation of a culture.

- **Race** refers to the anthropological system of classification based upon the physical characteristics determined by heredity.

- **Ethnicity** generally refers to a classification of people based upon their national or regional origin.

- **Codes of conduct** are sets of rules regarding right and wrong, based on one’s values and beliefs, which guide a person’s actions or behavior.

- **Ethnocentrism** is generally characterized by isolation from persons of other cultures, a refusal to consider other ways of life, a presumption that one’s own values and beliefs are “the right ones” and a profound disrespect and disregard for the values and beliefs of anyone who is different. Ethnocentrism prevents effective communication with people from other cultural backgrounds.

- **Stereotyping** is a generalization about the characteristics of a certain group of people, assumed to be true of all its members, but not backed by empirical data. Stereotyping promotes the communication of misinformation and misjudgments.

The notion of cultural competence takes these concepts further. In the *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, Rycus and Hughes (1998) defined cultural competence as “the capacity to relate to persons from diverse cultures in a sensitive, respectful, and productive way.”

In 2001 the Child Welfare League of America updated its original 1991 definition of cultural competence. The revised definition, very similar to the one by Rycus and Hughes reads:
“The ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the work of the individuals, families, tribes, and communities and protects the dignity of each.”

In other words, cultural competence is having the awareness, knowledge and skills to recognize the complexity and relevance of culture in each life and find the tools/resources to respond appropriately to each individual according to his/her cultural identity and needs.

Culture forms the basis of a person’s attitude and values. It also shapes an individual’s behavior. Caseworkers must realize this when working with their clients. They must also recognize that their own beliefs, values, and family and cultural background have a very real impact on their work with children and families. The quality and effectiveness of their relationship with clients will be influenced by the level of genuine understanding, respect, and acceptance they convey. Even case outcomes can be influenced by the level of cultural competence, or incompetence, of caseworkers.

For caseworkers to begin the journey toward cultural competence, it is important to have an understanding of one’s own beliefs and values, as well as his/her personal background. This requires an on-going process of self-assessment and reflection. By looking inside oneself and acknowledging one’s misperceptions, prejudices, etc, about people, the caseworker is better able to understand his or her own sense of self and develop greater understanding and appreciation of others.

Failure to provide culturally competent services will have a negative impact on clients and persons in the work environment. The caseworker’s inability to relate to persons from different cultures in a sensitive, respectful, productive way will be reflected in the caseworker’s interactions with clients, co-workers, and service providers. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the caseworker accepts his or her responsibility to develop an accurate understanding of each person’s values and codes of conduct. This will enable the caseworker to be more successful in his or her professional efforts.

The importance of cultural competence is also reflected in the rules that govern the caseworker’s activities. Caseworkers have a legal requirement to use interpreters for people with hearing impairments, and provide translators for people who do not speak fluent English.

The OCWTP considers the impact of culture in the philosophical underpinnings and its application to the field in every training presented. Additionally, specific workshops are
offered to enhance learning. Following are the competencies addressed in the workshop entitled "Transcending Cultural Differences":

**Skill Set 307-01: Ability to provide culturally competent casework services**

307-01-001 Aware of worker’s own cultural background, including values, beliefs, and traditions; and how these can affect worker’s perspective

307-01-002 Knows ways in which an ethnocentric perspective can interfere with the worker’s ability to serve clients from different cultures

307-01-009 Knows how to differentiate stereotypes from culturally-relevant information

307-01-011 Knows how to involve cultural consultants and key informants from within the culture and local community to facilitate communication and promote culturally-relevant casework services

307-01-013 Can use interviewing and engagement strategies to learn about a family’s culture from the families, and from community leaders. Achieving cultural competence is an on-going, lifelong endeavor, “a continuous process of learning about the cultural strengths of others and integrating their unique abilities and perspectives” into one’s frame of reference. How well people relate to each other is a reflection of their level of cultural competence.

**Activity:**

1. The caseworker should talk with the unit supervisor about the ethnicities, religions, races, and sexual identities, etc. of persons to whom the agency provides services.

2. The caseworker should learn demographic information about county residents, including the refugee population and non-English speaking persons.

3. List three demographic groups your agency serves and discuss available services within the county.

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4. What is the agency’s policy and procedure for seeking the assistance of interpreters and translators?