

Connecting with children's lives

by Anne Stonehouse

Most child care professionals believe that it is important to know children within the context of their family. Like many aspects of quality practice, holding this belief is relatively easy. What is harder is figuring out what is important to know, how to find out what you need to know and, most importantly, how the information about a child's life outside the service should inform practice.

When a child comes from a cultural background that is different to that of the child care professional and/or to many other families using the service, professionals often perceive difference itself as being a barrier to knowing the child in context.

This article aims to encourage and support child care professionals to consider effective strategies for learning about children holistically and to develop a broader idea of what is meant by a child's 'culture'.

What does 'knowing children' mean and why is it important?

One of the most fundamental principles of good quality practice in child care settings is that each child's experiences and what is provided are based on a deep knowledge of that child. It is now accepted that knowing children isn't just about understanding their development, interests, and personality. It is also about being aware of their life and experiences outside the program. The term used most commonly is 'knowing the child in context'. Typically this involves becoming familiar with aspects of the child's family life, community and culture. Understanding and respecting children's and families' backgrounds can support child care professionals to relate to each child effectively and offer meaningful experiences.

It is widely accepted that the family plays the most significant role in a child's learning and development. The learning that a child does in the context of home and family has lifelong impact. Therefore, the learning and experiences that children have in child care should complement and build on their experiences outside of the service.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 2.1, 3.1, 3.3-3.7 and 4.2

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1-3.3, 4.2 and 5.1-5.4

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1-2.3, 3.3, 4.1-4.6 and 6.1

What is meant by 'culture'?

Each family and child has a culture. However, culture is often thought of as being only ethnic background. In this article the term is used more broadly to describe the child's life and experiences outside child care.

A child's culture consists of, among other things, who is in their family, where their family lives, the language they speak, their religion, what the daily life of the family is like, family values and the challenges they face. In other words, a child's culture is about how the child lives her or his life and what the collective life of the family is like.

Naturally a family's culture is influenced by its ethnic background. However, over-emphasising a family's ethnic background will cause problems if it leads to child care professionals making inaccurate assumptions about families. Even assuming that a family identifies strongly with its cultural background can be inaccurate, as there is broad variation among families. Limited knowledge can lead to operating with stereotypes, and in the past the tendency to focus on culture has resulted in tokenistic, inappropriate and ineffective efforts. It must be recognised that there is huge variation in family life among families from the same cultural background. For example, two Indigenous families may adopt vastly different child rearing practices according to their own particular values and beliefs within their cultural identity.

When considering the child in the context of their culture, child care professionals need to think about all of the things that influence the child's existence, learning and development. These influences include family, relationships and lifestyle. What works best is getting to know about every aspect of the child's life, including the family's ethnic background, without making this the sole or main focus.

How do child care professionals get to know about a child's family culture?

It takes time to gain a genuine understanding of a child or a family. It is not simply a matter of asking a set of questions about the child during enrolment and orientation. Some of the most important things about a child will be learned only when there is a strong relationship between the child care professional and the family. Even when a good relationship exists however, there will be vast differences among individual families. Some will be very forthcoming and open and offer a great deal of information, while others will be much more private and not want to share as much. These individual differences must be respected.

Of course there are some things that can be discussed with families when children start care. Treated sensitively, this discussion will help the family to understand that the child care professionals really want to get to know the child and to work in partnership with the family to provide children with the best possible experiences. Questions may be asked about things such as the child's:

- family composition and main carers or significant people in their lives
- routines at home
- preferred family activities.

Families should also be encouraged to share with child care professionals what they consider to be most important in their child's experience, and to express anything they are concerned about in relation to their child starting care.

In the beginning it is most valuable to establish with families that the service wants to work collaboratively with the family on behalf of their child. It should be clearly communicated to families that the people caring for their child want to know what the family wants for their child. It is important that families understand that the child care professionals at the service want to know about and respond to any concerns the family may have about their child's experiences in care.

Through informal daily communication, as child care professionals and the family build a relationship, child care professionals will naturally find out more about the child's cultural background and how this affects the child's life. One of the most important skills to apply to



learning about the child's family culture is that of empathy. It is helpful for child care professionals to place themselves in the family members' shoes and think about how they would like to be approached if they were the parent of a child in the service.

However, it is essential that child care professionals exercise caution in seeking information from families about their home lives. Care must be taken to avoid giving families the impression that they are obligated to divulge everything about their personal life, and child care professionals need to respect that some families may be more reserved than others in what they wish to share.

How can child care professionals use their knowledge of children's lives to promote positive outcomes for them?

The aim is to incorporate aspects of the child's life outside of child care into their child care experience. This is done through the physical environment, routines, the experiences provided and interactions and conversations with the child.

Some examples include:

- displaying photos from children's home lives and their activities outside the service
- encouraging families to share information about children's and families' experiences outside of child care and talking with the children about these



- providing information for families in community languages
- celebrating important events in the lives of children, families and child care professionals, such as a wedding, the birth of a baby, graduation from university, a new staff member or family coming to the service, a staff member or family leaving or children starting school
- encouraging families to share their insights and knowledge about their child and demonstrating that this information is used to inform planning for the child's experiences in the service
- engaging in informal communication with the family and reciprocal sharing of information about the child
- communicating with families respectfully and non-judgmentally
- showing families that they are welcome in a variety of ways.

It is not necessary for child care professionals to be 'experts' on cultures associated with particular ethnic backgrounds. Child

care professionals can seek out community organisations for information and resources, and most importantly seek information from the families themselves, as this is much more useful than 'studying' cultures from books or relying on popular and often inaccurate or generalised information.

This will assist child care professionals to avoid acting on stereotypes and making inappropriate assumptions.

Treating any aspect of culture or family life as a departure from what is considered to be 'normal' can have the effect of emphasising difference rather than promoting inclusiveness. A classic example of this is 'doing' holidays or festivals from other cultures. Connecting with a child's life isn't about singling them or an aspect of their culture out as being different.

Key messages

- To ensure that children's needs and interests are catered for most effectively, it is important that child care professionals gain a genuine understanding of children's family lives and the experiences outside of child care that make up their individual cultures.
- You don't have to be an expert on different cultures; rather you need to have ways to find out about each child's individual culture.
- While we are all different in many ways, in many ways we are all the same.
- The key is for all families to see something of themselves and their lives in the service.
- Child care professionals should never think that they know all that they need to know about a child or the child's family.

The answer is partnership. Ultimately, the key to connecting with children's lives is through having good relationships with families ■

References and further reading

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