Creating Cultural Sensitivity in Foster Care

Cultural identity is not a destination, it is a journey — and for youth in foster or adoptive care, this journey can be a long, difficult one with numerous hurdles. Each of us is grounded in a complex, unique identity that develops out of our individual cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We develop these identities in a variety of ways, such as family traditions, religious teachings or cultural activities. We learn the ways of our families and others in our cultural and ethnic groups by participating in these circles of support. For youth in foster care, they have been separated from the social circles where they would have developed their distinct mix of cultural, ethnic and individual characteristics. Foster and adoptive parents, social workers, biological families and other people involved with youth in care should consider the role of this disruption on the development of a child’s concept of who they are. There are many ways we can encourage and enhance identity development during a youth’s placement to respect and repair this loss and support the child in building a stronger self-concept. The goal is for youths’ cultural identity to be an integral part of their lives, as it is for most healthy adults.

It is critical for foster and adoptive parents and support staff to offer multiple opportunities for youths’ individual exploration of cultural, historical and gender issues (a core principle of trauma-informed care). This process starts with understanding that “cultural identity” is not rooted solely in racial or ethnic backgrounds. One of the ways we think about culture is in terms of things we have in common with other people.

Our ideas about culture need to expand to appreciate how cultural identity is also forged through the relationships we develop with people and groups based on shared experiences, shared food, shared values, etc. When we look at culture this way, we begin to see that differences in rural versus urban may be more significant than differences in race, and that differences in parental level of education may be more significant than differences in ethnicity. As foster and adoptive parents explore cultural identity with kids in their
Creating Cultural Sensitivity in Foster Care

Cultural identity is not a destination, it is a journey — and for youth in foster care, this journey can be a long, difficult one with numerous hurdles. Each of us is grounded in complex, unique identities that develop out of our individual cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We develop these identities in a variety of ways, such as family traditions, religious teachings or cultural activities. We learn the ways of our families and others in our cultural and ethnic groups by participating in these circles of support. For youth in foster care, they have been separated from the social circles where they would have developed their distinct mix of cultural, ethnic and individual characteristics. Foster and adoptive parents, social workers, biological families and other people involved with youth in care should consider the role of this disruption on the development of a child’s concept of who they are. There are many ways we can encourage and enhance identity development during a youth’s placement to respect and repair this loss and support the child in building a stronger self-concept. The goal is for youth’s cultural identity to be an integral part of their lives, as it is for most healthy adults.

It is critical for foster and adoptive parents and support staff to offer multiple opportunities for youth’s individual exploration of cultural, historical and gender issues (a core principle of trauma-informed care). This process starts with understanding that “cultural identity” is not rooted solely in racial or ethnic backgrounds. One of the ways we think about culture is in terms of things we have in common with other people.

Our ideas about culture need to expand to appreciate how cultural identity is also forged through the relationships we develop with people and groups based on shared experiences, shared food, shared values, etc. When we look at culture this way, we begin to see that differences in rural versus urban may be more significant than differences in race, and that differences in parental level of education may be more significant than differences in ethnicity. As foster and adoptive parents explore cultural identity with kids in their family’s cultural and ethnic activities, especially if they differ from that of the child in care.

Foster and adoptive parents can follow some basic guidelines for creating a culturally-sensitive home and for nurturing healthy development of youth in care:

- Be respectful of other cultures and their traditions.
- Allow and encourage youth choice.
- Allow voluntary participation in your family’s cultural and ethnic activities.
- Provide access to culturally relevant activities and locations for your youth.

Once this basic foundation is in place, foster and adoptive parents can practice more specific activities to help youth in care establish or relearn their cultural identity. Remember, placement disruptions and other disconnections from their past create challenges for these youth to embrace their culture. So, we, as “helpers” need to be more intentional about how we create safe environments for children to learn more about who they are and where they come from. Below are some examples of how to increase sensitivity to diversity and to foster connections to a youth’s culture:

- Find out your youth’s favorite meal — and make it for them (or even “with” them).
- Explore how your youth has experienced (and prefers to experience) holidays, birthdays, holidays and other celebrations.
- Ask the child in your care to share their lifework with you or help the youth begin one, and share your lifework (e.g., photo albums) with youth in your care.
- Connect youth with cultural or ethnic activities that they are interested in attending.
- Seek out members of the child’s culture and/or ethnicity, particularly family members with whom they have shared experiences (and create opportunities for renewing or rebuilding those connections if possible/appropriate).
- Visit places where the youth can be among other people of their culture.
- Make your home culturally sensitive by providing multicultural:
  - Art (paintings, sculpture, folk art)
  - Toys and games
  - Media (e.g., books, movies, magazines)
- Visit museums, stores and local events that cater to the culture of children in your care.

All of us are most experienced with our own cultural and, as adults, have cultivated our own individual self-concept and values with time and exploration. Welcoming youth with different cultures, ethnicities and values into our homes can be a challenge, especially when our values clash with those of the chi-