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Why culture matters for children's development and wellbeing

Australia is one of the world's most culturally diverse societies

Census figures show that 2.5% of the population is Indigenous Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. 24% of the Australian population were born overseas. 26% of Australians have at least one parent who was born overseas, and the number of languages spoken at home by Australians is more than 400 (ABS figures 2006 – www.abs.gov.au). Schools in Australia therefore serve students and families from many different cultural backgrounds.

Humans are cultural beings. We learn to communicate and understand our world through sharing language, customs, behaviours, beliefs and values. Our cultural experiences and values shape the ways we see ourselves and what we think is important. Cultural perspectives influence how we parent, how we understand children and how we educate them.

This overview looks at influences related to cultural diversity that may affect the social and emotional development and wellbeing of children from CALD backgrounds. Some of the issues discussed may also be relevant to Indigenous children and families. However, to adequately address the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous children and their families, a more specific understanding of their particular cultural needs and circumstances is required.

What is cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD)

Cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) refers to people who identify with particular groups based on their birthplace, ethnicity, language, values, beliefs or world views. This does not mean that everyone from a particular cultural group will hold exactly the same values or do things in the same way. Showing support for cultural diversity involves talking with people to find out how best to include them and respect their cultural needs.

Culture and belonging

Research in many different cultures confirms the importance for all children of developing secure emotional connections with the adults who care for them. However, the ways that parents and carers go about developing these connections vary based on cultural beliefs about parenting and child development, as well as individual preferences and capacities. For example, in some cultures children are expected to always listen and respect their elders, while in other cultures children are taught from an early age to speak up for themselves.

Children's connection to their culture develops as they learn the rules and standards that govern social relationships for their cultural group. Having a strong sense of their own cultural history and traditions helps children build a positive cultural identity for themselves. This also supports children's sense of belonging and self-esteem.

To be able to also get on well in another culture children (and adults) need to understand and respond to different expectations. It can be complex, and sometimes confusing, for children from diverse cultural backgrounds to fit within two cultures. Children may feel that they have to choose one culture or the other, even though they have to live in both.

The stress of experiencing cultural conflict can have negative impacts on children's wellbeing. However, when children have a positive sense of belonging to both cultures, their emotional wellbeing is supported and so is their learning.

Particular challenges that may affect children and families from CALD backgrounds

Children and families from CALD backgrounds may face a range of challenges as they find their way in the broader Australian society. The following challenges are common.

Migration and resettlement

Resettling in a new country or into a new place involves finding housing, employment, schools, social connections and services. Lack of knowledge about how things work in the new environment and communication difficulties can make the challenge of resettlement all the more stressful. Family, friends and others who would normally provide support may have been left behind in the move. Feelings of loneliness, isolation or concern for those left behind can occur. These difficulties affect both children and adults.

Language and communication

Language can be a major barrier for newly arrived families. Lacking English language skills or being unfamiliar with Australian English can undermine confidence, make finding a job or learning at school more difficult, and contribute to social isolation. Concern about language skills can make communication with schools and other services more difficult for parents and carers.

Communication issues can arise in other ways as well. When the experiences, customs and beliefs of children and families from different cultural backgrounds are not recognised or valued, it can lead to miscommunication. For example, making eye contact when speaking to someone else is considered a sign of respect in mainstream Anglo-Australian culture; however, in some other cultures respect is shown by lowering eyes or looking away.



Effects of trauma

When migration is prompted by particularly stressful experiences, as is the case for refugees, there can be additional challenges for resettlement and wellbeing. Traumatic experiences may have occurred through being exposed to violence, war or torture. Children and families may have lived under threat and in fear, they may have witnessed the deaths of relatives or friends, or experienced hardship and danger in coming to Australia. Some have received harsh treatment in immigration detention on their arrival here.

These kinds of highly stressful circumstances remain difficult long after the events that caused them. Some of the common reactions that may occur in children who have been through traumatic events include increased fear and anxiety which may lead to clingy behaviour, re-experiencing the trauma when feeling threatened, or difficulty in trusting and connecting with others. Such difficulties may sometimes lead to extreme independence and mistrust of others and/or social isolation. Refugees may have strong feelings of shame and guilt about past events. For some children who have been traumatised feelings of pain and anger can also lead to behavioural problems. Difficulties associated with past trauma and resettlement can affect learning and school performance of children from refugee backgrounds.

Discrimination and racism

Being subjected to racist and discriminatory attitudes is a problem for many people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia. This is especially an issue for visible minority groups, such as those who look different from the majority (white) population. Both overt racism (e.g., name-calling and bullying) and covert racism (e.g., ignoring or otherwise disadvantaging those from diverse backgrounds) can leave children (and adults) feeling marginalised and disempowered, with negative impacts on wellbeing. The effects of racism and discrimination make resettlement more difficult for families, and create undue stress and social disadvantage. Racism increases children's sense of difference and vulnerability by devaluing their culture and making them feel unwelcome.

It takes time and effort for families and individuals to work out how to keep their own cultural traditions and at the same time understand and find a place within the wider Australian culture.

The accompanying KidsMatter resource, *Supporting children from culturally diverse backgrounds – Suggestions for parents and carers*, provides a number of ideas that CALD parents and carers may find helpful.

The accompanying list, *Cultural diversity and children's wellbeing – Other resources*, includes details of relevant information resources for parents and carers that are available in a range of languages.

Parenting across cultures

Cultural differences in parenting practices can lead to tension or misunderstanding both within families and between families and others. Common differences relate to the ways affection is shown to children, attitudes to physical punishment, and how much emphasis is placed on family responsibility compared with promoting children's independence. Some cultural practices have very strict codes of behaviour according to age and/or gender.

When children from CALD backgrounds are exposed to different cultural values, parents and carers may find that practices that once worked in the home culture may no longer be effective. Some practices, for example physical punishment, may no longer be appropriate. This can create confusion and miscommunication, and may also become a source of family conflict and tension, especially as children grow into the teenage years. Parents and carers may be concerned about children losing their values and cultural identity through the influences promoted in the media, at school, or through contact with children from different backgrounds. Questions of cultural identity are common themes in inter-generational conflict within CALD families as they try to maintain their own cultural values while adapting to the range of cultural influences found in the wider community.



The role of schools

Schools play a central role in the lives of students and their families. The school experiences of children and families from CALD backgrounds shape their encounters with Australian society and have significant effects on their sense of inclusion or exclusion and subsequent quality of engagement within the wider community.

In order to meet the learning, social and wellbeing needs of students and their families from diverse backgrounds, it is important for schools to understand their particular circumstances. These may include migration, refugee and resettlement experiences as well as different cultural values and styles of communicating and learning. Schools can play a critical role in supporting and engaging students and families from diverse backgrounds. They also have a significant responsibility to promote values of mutual respect and understanding, and to effectively address problems of discrimination when they occur in the school setting.

By actively promoting the needs and interests of students and families from culturally diverse backgrounds and building relationships of trust and understanding with parents and carers, schools can make a positive difference to CALD students' mental health and wellbeing. Having a positive sense of belonging in both settings helps children move between cultures with greater ease and confidence and increases their motivation and engagement at school.

Cultural competence and children's wellbeing

Cultural competence begins from the understanding that we are all influenced by the different social, educational and organisational cultures in which we live and participate. Recognising that ours is not the only way of seeing or doing things opens us to learning about other perspectives. Exploring differences as well as similarities in our cultural expectations improves our capacity to understand and relate to others and helps to build social cohesion.

One cultural expectation that may be new to many CALD parents and carers is the idea that parents, carers and school staff can work together to support children's learning and development. Some cultures (and some families) emphasise relying on family rather than outsiders to resolve difficulties. This can make parents and carers reluctant to discuss their concerns about children with school staff. Families may also be structured differently. For example, in some families grandparents, aunts or uncles may be centrally involved in decisions affecting children.

Developing effective cross-cultural relationships

Developing effective cross-cultural relationships for supporting children's wellbeing requires careful listening and flexibility. It is particularly important to recognise that there may be very different understandings of mental health and a range of ways of expressing difficulties. Children's emotional or behavioural issues must be considered in their cultural context and discussed in ways that are non-judgmental and non-stigmatising.



For further information about children with cultural diversity and children's mental health problems see the accompanying KidsMatter list *Cultural diversity and children's wellbeing – Other resources*

Further information on KidsMatter is available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au