Australia is home to people from many different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, bringing richness to our community.

This means that children today will form friendships, learn with and interact with people from many cultures different to their own. When children grow up to understand, appreciate and respect the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity around them, this builds a positive and accepting community. A community such as this supports children to develop skills and attitudes that will assist them in their relationships and contribute to their social and emotional wellbeing.

By working together, families and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can create supportive environments for children from majority and minority racial and ethnic groups. This includes understanding ways to promote positive attitudes, counter negative attitudes and respond to racism if it occurs. Supportive environments like these help children from all cultural backgrounds to understand, respect and appreciate cultural differences. When adults are open and accepting, children learn to respect diversity and embrace cultural differences.

Everybody needs to feel accepted, respected and included. Feeling welcome and at home is important for positive mental health.
Cultural, racial and ethnic diversity and children’s mental health

Culture can mean many things and is not necessarily linked to a person’s racial or ethnic background. Together, these are some of the things that shape the way children see themselves and what they think is important. Because of the diverse nature of Australia’s population, many children can belong to more than one cultural, racial or ethnic group or community. This sometimes means children need to figure out how they fit in across different contexts.

Developing a sense of belonging within multiple communities can be challenging for children as there can be different expectations and priorities. However, when a child feels their family, cultural background and individual uniqueness are respected and valued, their sense of identity, belonging and self-esteem is strengthened. Children who feel respected are more likely to participate in social experiences and form strong relationships in their early childhood community.

When children who are not from the majority culture experience racism and prejudice, this can impact on their social and emotional wellbeing, learning and relationships. Young children are particularly vulnerable to this.

Helping all children understand difference encourages them to feel good about who they are, understand where they fit into the world and appreciate diversity in others. This helps children to feel like they belong and supports their mental health and wellbeing.

Understanding diversity, being from a minority culture or part of more than one culture can be complicated at times. Children and families can be faced with different values, expectations and choices. Sometimes it can be difficult for children and families to feel like they belong or know where to turn for support.

Attitudes and behaviours towards people who are different to oneself are learnt in early childhood (Priest et al., 2012).

Things families can do to help children respect diversity

- Help your child to develop a strong cultural identity and sense of belonging by telling them stories that share a sense of pride in your culture.
- Talk to your child about how people are the same, as well as the differences between them. Children are curious and open to hearing and learning about new things.
- Seek support and advice from people you trust when required. Talking with relatives and friends who understand your values can help you think through the different problems you might face as a parent.
- You can contact your child’s ECEC service if you have any questions about your child or their development. If it is possible, ask your ECEC service how you can become involved at the service.
Things educators can do to promote respect for diversity

- Provide opportunities for children to listen to people from a range of backgrounds and their perspectives.
- Respect individual differences and acknowledge that membership of a particular group does not mean everyone from that group has the same values, beliefs, rituals and needs.
- Promote and model inclusive behaviour, for example having notices available in a number of relevant languages for families and encouraging everyone to contribute their skills and interests to the service.
- Encourage opportunities for families and educators to develop social connections with each other. For example, notice their strengths and the ways they contribute to the service.
- Expand children’s awareness of difference through social events, books, songs or play materials.
- Research biographical stories of local people and people from around the world and introduce who they are to children (bring the world to the children!).
- When families speak more than one language, learn keywords in their home language.
- Utilise the skills of educators who speak multiple languages
- Link families with appropriate local services to provide support and assistance.
Things families and educators can both do to promote respect for diversity

- Encourage children to recognise and appreciate people for the things that make them unique and special.
- Support children to understand that just because somebody looks or sounds different, or does things in a slightly different way doesn’t mean that this person is any less worthy of respect or friendship.
- Be accepting of differences yourself. Encourage children to view differences as something that makes a person interesting and unique.
- Support all children to develop the skills necessary to form positive friendships regardless of differences in practices, languages and ethnic backgrounds.

Talking about difference with children: A few tips

- **Be prepared to discuss it anytime** because stereotypes are everywhere.
- **Focus on empathy** and find ways to understand other perspectives.
- **Make it about the child** and how they would want to be treated.
- **Be a role model** because children are always watching!


Diversity and children’s mental health

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.