

CAREERS AND BASICS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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For Review Purposes Only

In This Chapter You Will Discover

- what factors go into creating a healthy, safe social-emotional environment.
- how adults treat children respectfully and what it looks like when they don't.
- why adults shouldn't talk about children in front of them.
- why an early childhood educator should be more like a mother hen than a drill sergeant.
- what stands in the way of continuity—an important ingredient in early childhood programs.
- why there is disagreement about focusing the early childhood program on the individual or on the community.
- that there is an early childhood culture that often differs from those of the families and even of staff members.
- a way to look at conflicting cultural priorities.
- that oppression affects child-rearing goals for some families.
- that culture is dynamic and always changing.
- why it is important that infants learn their home culture.
- the ways in which the early childhood culture is evolving.

Chapter Topics

Qualities of the Social-Emotional Environment

- Respect

Warmth, Nurturance, Acceptance, Protection, and Responsiveness

- Continuity of Care
- Focus on Inclusion: A Feeling of Belonging

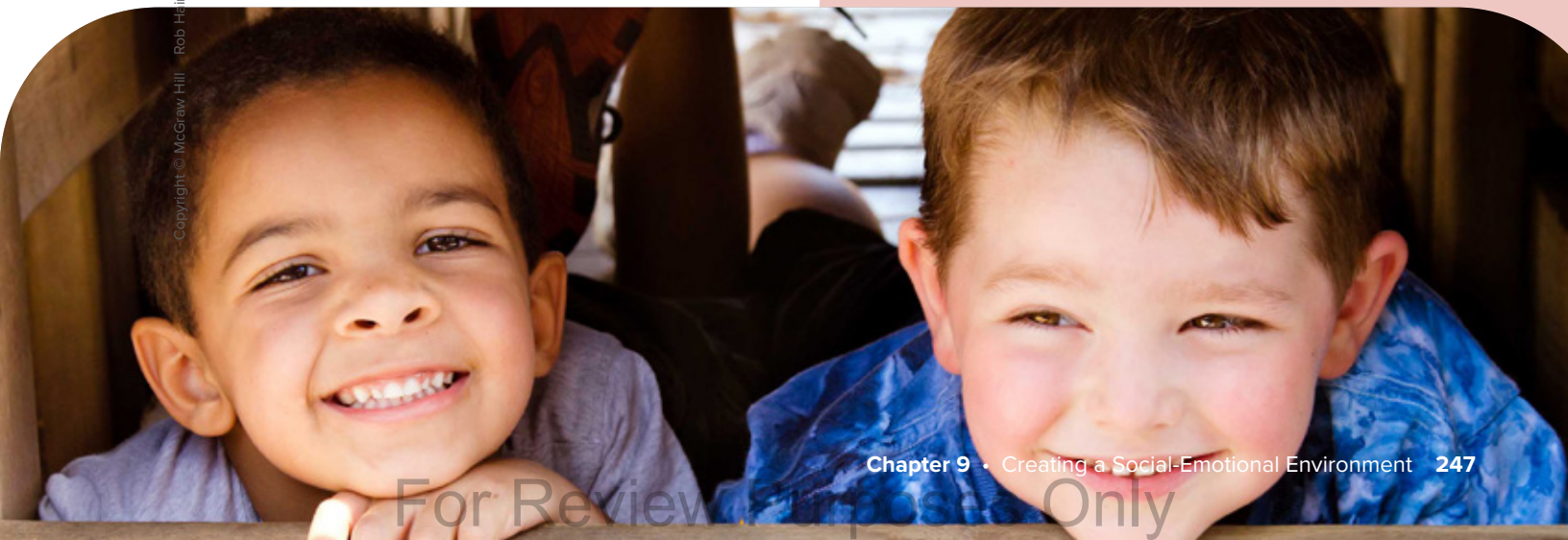
Should the Program Focus on the Community or on the Individual?

Managing Cultural Differences

- The Child's Home Culture
- The Dynamic Nature of Culture

The Evolution of the Early Childhood Culture

A Story to End With



The social-emotional environment of the early childhood program is harder to detect than the physical environment, but it is very real and affects everyone in it. As much care and consideration must go into planning for a healthy, safe, and nurturing social-emotional environment as for the physical environment. Although the social-emotional environment is not distinctly listed as an NAEYC Program Standard, it develops naturally when programs adhere to the other ten standards. Standard 3, called “Teaching,” states that programs should use developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and effective approaches that enhance each child’s learning and development in the context of the program’s curriculum goals. The rationale is that teachers who optimize children’s opportunities for learning use approaches that respond to the different backgrounds children bring, including interests, experiences, learning styles, needs, and capacities to learn. When teachers approach children’s learning this way, they create a positive social-emotional environment. Standard 7, “Families,” also relates to the social-emotional environment as a program recognizes the primacy of children’s families and creates collaborative relationships with them. Sensitivity to diversity, language, and culture is part of this standard and thereby adds to the social-emotional climate of the program.

Qualities of the Social-Emotional Environment

Many aspects of the social-emotional and physical environments overlap. How the physical environment is set up directly affects the qualities of the social-emotional environment. Some of the environmental qualities explored in Chapter 8 were cooperation, equity, authenticity, exploration, and aesthetics. This chapter will focus on the social-emotional qualities of respect, warmth, nurturance, acceptance, protection, responsiveness, and continuity.

Respect

What does it mean to create a respectful environment? The basic principle of many cultures’ child-rearing practices is to teach children to respect adults. However, what does it mean for an adult to respect a child? Magda Gerber, a well-known child-care professional and founder of Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) talked and wrote more about respect than any other concept. According to Gerber, respect is summed up by treating a child, no matter how young, as partner from day one and, thus, like a fully human person rather than like an object.

How do adults treat children like objects? Consider this scene: a caregiver with a baby in her arms is talking over the fence to a preschool teacher who is supervising four-year-olds playing in a sandbox. The caregiver is telling the teacher what a miserable morning she has had so far with the baby, who is whimpering softly as she holds him. She tries to perk him up by jostling him a bit. Then she tickles him. He squirms. Finally, she tosses him in the air and catches him, laughing at his screams. Are they screams of terror or laughter? She does not really know or care.

In the meantime, the teacher has moved over to where two children are beginning to argue. She comes up behind one and, without a word, abruptly picks her up and carries her over to the other side of the sandbox. The child looks startled.

What is wrong with this picture? Could you see the signs of disrespect? The caregiver was discussing the baby right in front of him. Maybe he could not understand what she was saying, but he probably suspected she was talking about him. She was acting as if he was not even there. Without trying to find out what the whimpers were about, she decided to distract him. She appeared not to care what he needed. Perhaps she was entertaining *herself* with this baby.

Tickling as a form of distraction is disrespectful. Would you ever think of tickling, say, a serious professor or a police officer issuing you a ticket? No. We only use tickling as a distraction with those who are helpless to stop us. Throwing the child in the air was also disrespectful—aside from being downright unsafe. “Throw balls, not children” should be the motto of every adult who lives or works with children.

Likewise, the preschool teacher did not tell the girl what she was going to do or why. She just picked her up like a sack of potatoes and moved her to another location. How would you feel if that were done to you? This same teacher probably sets up circle time by physically placing children in the chairs unless they quickly scramble in by themselves. She probably sees it as being expedient, but what she is really doing is treating the children like objects. It is likely this teacher also lines up children by pulling, hauling, and shoving them until they are situated just so.

Notice the lack of communication with the children in the scene. There was no attempt to observe what was going on or to try to understand what needs were being expressed. These adults did not listen to the children. They did not interact with them either, except in physical ways that were either distracting or demanding.

To summarize disrespectful adult behaviors:

- Talking about a child, even a baby, in front of him as if he did not exist
- Ignoring a child’s feelings
- Distracting a child when she is unhappy
- Treating children like objects
- Refusing to listen to a child

Let us look at a different scene that shows how adults treat children respectfully. Kayla, an infant, is lying on a blanket fingering a soft ball. She looks up as she sees her caregiver approach. The caregiver comes at her from the front, not from behind. The caregiver does not want to surprise Kayla. She thinks it is more respectful to let Kayla anticipate what is about to happen. She says to Kayla as she leans down and holds out her arms, “I’m going to pick you up now. We’re going outside.” She pauses, watching to see if Kayla will respond. Kayla gives a little wiggle and lurches toward the caregiver. “Ah, you understood me, didn’t you?” She smiles, reaches out for Kayla, and picks her up.

The director walks by and says to the caregiver, “How’s Kayla today?” Instead of launching into a discussion with the director about how Kayla’s feeling and what happened at home that morning, she looks at Kayla, including her in the conversation: “I think you’re feeling okay, aren’t you Kayla?” She has some information to pass on to the director but purposely saves it for later to avoid talking about Kayla and her home situation in front of her. She is treating Kayla like a human being worthy of respect, irrespective of her age.

Here is another scene that illustrates how respect is a learned skill: “Oh they’re all so cute. They’re just adorable!” gushes a new teacher’s aide in a preschool program. The teacher remembers when he felt that way about young children. But he has moved beyond those feelings and can see children as individuals and not talk about them as if they were monkeys in a zoo, there for his entertainment, nor do we want to value children for their extrinsic appearances. He has also learned other ways to respect children. He does not talk to them in a sweet-as-honeyed voice as if they were vacuous dolls. He relates to them on their level but with the same respect he shows peers and older people. Similarly, he tries not to praise them or have them seek out his approval by using phrases such as “good job” because phrases such as these do not convey enough information, nor do they acknowledge a child’s feelings. Instead, one could say, “You did it!” or “I noticed that you used purple and blue in your drawing.” It is important that children do things for their own pleasure, not for adults’ approval.



Tips and Techniques: How Respect Relates to Clothing

Dressing children up in cute clothes as if they were dolls shows a lack of respect, according to Magda Gerber. Cute clothes are fine as long as they are comfortable and do not restrict movement. But babies who try to crawl in ruffled dresses are definitely hampered; crawling becomes virtually impossible when the knees get caught up in the skirt. Likewise, toddlers and preschoolers in slick-soled shoes cannot run, climb, or jump without fear of slipping, and pastel-colored clothing accumulates more stains than darker-colored clothes. Of course, there are times when children’s dress is directed by the program. Consider the seasonal performance planned for parents. When children are asked to wear adorable but uncomfortable costumes that they do not want to wear, respect is also an issue.

Usually, however, the early childhood educator is on the other side of the clothes problem, trying to convince parents to dress their children for play in inexpensive clothes that nobody has to worry about. It is easy to inform parents at the intake interview and through parent information sheets or handbooks what the program considers appropriate clothing. Some parents already know that it is best to send their children in play clothes and are glad to comply. Other parents, however, are not so happy about dressing their children “down” for what they consider “school.” Just as it is important that early childhood educators respect children, so it is important that they respect parents. Respecting parents does not mean issuing mandates about clothing but engaging in dialogue to understand the parents’ attitudes. Then conflict-management skills come into play as the two parties try to resolve their differences.

Accordingly, it is important to try to never label a child as being a “bad boy” or “good girl.” Instead, caregivers should try to explain why a particular behavior may be inappropriate, and why. He vows to take some time in a staff meeting to help the new aide understand what it means to respect children. (See the *Tips and Techniques* box on page 250 for a further view on respect.)

Showing children respect is important for fostering healthy inward and outward social-emotional growth, and the best way to understand respect is to put yourself in a child’s shoes. Would you feel respected if someone treated you the same way you treat children? The way to get children to respect you is to respect them. In that way, you both model respect and earn it, and there is a big difference between demanding respect and earning it.

Warmth, Nurturance, Acceptance, Protection, and Responsiveness

Young children need to be handled with warmth and tenderness. They need a mother hen, not a drill sergeant. Just imagine a mother hen: those feathers offer a warm, cozy cover to little chicks as they scurry in at night to snuggle in the dark softness. But they do not go in just at night; they also scurry to the warmth of the mother hen whenever danger threatens. When they are scared or when they are cold, they receive what they need, when they need it. They receive warmth, protection, nurturance, and responsiveness.



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Children need adults who respond in warm, understanding ways.

Young children in an early childhood program may not need a mother hen per se, but they do need all those qualities of warmth, protection, nurturance, and responsiveness in their environment. When they are scared—because of real or imagined danger—they should be able to seek the figurative warmth of a caring and understanding adult.

As noted in Chapter 6, how a teacher responds to a child's needs indirectly teaches children, or models, unwritten social rules in regards to building relationships with others. By providing responsive and nurturing environments, children develop empathy and feel safe enough to explore novel activities and friendships. Indeed, research shows that children in good social and emotional health develop essential skills for later academic success, including confidence, emotional self-regulation, communication, and building close relationships with caregivers and peers (Ho and Funk, 2018).

Again, it may help to see what the lack of these qualities looks like in order to understand their importance. Imagine a baby who isn't feeling well. He cries. Instead of a warm, understanding, responsive adult, a cold, uncaring one approaches him. Her goal is to stop the crying, so she tries repositioning him by turning him over in a rough, unfeeling way. This does not help. He cries harder. She picks him up and feeds him, even though he ate not too long ago. Suddenly, he spits up. The adult jerks him away from her body roughly. "Now see what you have done," she says harshly, trying to brush the spit-up off her clothes with the cloth she was carrying over her shoulder. She puts the crying baby down in his crib and goes to sponge herself off. When she finishes, she comes to attend to him. He is asleep. She sits down, relieved.



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Here is another scene. Four-year-old Jenna misses her mother. She stands crying by the window where she last saw her. Ignoring Jenna, the teacher works around her, setting up the room and greeting other children as they arrive. When Jenna grabs for the teacher's apron as she passes by, her hand is roughly pried loose and she is told, "You'd better just get over this crying, Missy! It won't do you any good. Your mother isn't coming back!" No mother hen for Jenna in this adult. No warmth, understanding, or reassurance. No feeling of protection.

Still another scene. Jackson has waited what seems hours for the red ball, and now he finally has it. He starts to bounce it happily under the hoop, getting ready to toss it in when a whistle blows. "Time to come in now," the teacher announces in a loud voice. Jackson runs the other way, clutching the ball tightly. The teacher catches him by the back of his jacket. "No, you don't, young man! Didn't you hear the whistle? That's it for now." Jackson wrenches loose, throws the ball as far across the yard as he can, and flings himself on the ground pounding his fists and crying.

"That's enough of that. Time-out for you!" says the teacher sternly and she carries him to a chair just inside the door by the window. He sits slumped over and looks wistfully at the ball outside in the corner of the yard where it rolled. Tears roll down his cheeks. No mother hen for Jackson. No understanding of his frustration and anger. No warmth or snuggles. And no reassurance that he will have another chance to play with the ball.

What these three scenes illustrate is that when you tune in to what children are feeling, you can acknowledge and accept what they are trying to express and thereby respond in warm and nurturing ways. And who would not rather have the warmth and protection of a mother hen over a brash, unfeeling drill sergeant?

Continuity of Care

Warmth, nurturance, acceptance, protection, and responsiveness are all qualities that help adults establish relationships with young children. But one additional quality is needed—continuity. Children need consistency in the people around them in order to feel comfortable, safe, and secure in a program away from home. Continuity is a vital ingredient of the social-emotional environment (Lally, 1995). Nevertheless, two factors work against continuity in early childhood education: high staff turnover rates and the frequent advancement of children from one classroom to another.

Continuity of care refers to the practice of assigning a caregiver/teacher to a child at the time of enrollment and continuing this familiar relationship throughout the duration of the child's time in a program. This practice supports the children and their relationships by limiting the number of changes they experience. This enables children to experience a stable, long-term relationship not only with their teacher but also with the other children in their peer group. According to Lally and Signer (2001), continuity of care has been shown to foster "staff and family cooperation and loyalty, creating a calmer, less stressful environment, and providing better opportunities for the growth and development of adults as well as children".

High staff turnover is a common impediment to continuity of care, an important indicator of quality in early childhood programs. Skilled educators are essential for creating developmentally appropriate learning environments that optimize learning during a sensitive period of brain development for children. Quality programs, however, are labor intensive and expensive.

Outward pressures such as the fundamental quality mandates of low teacher-to-child ratios and minimum education requirements, along with funding constraints from both governments (public programs) and working-class families, keep wages low (Workman, 2018). With the exception of public programs, which tend to offer higher wages, pay remains relatively low for the average early childhood education (ECE) educator (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The low wages, poor benefits, and more recently, high degree requirements sustain a revolving door in the field for ECE educators, with many leaving to teach kindergarten or transitional kindergarten (California) in public schools for better pay to comparable work (Workman, 2018).

Let us look at the difference between two programs—one with a high turnover rate and one with a low turnover rate. The ABC child care center has always had a high turnover rate and high absenteeism among its staff. So when little Jamie arrives on a Monday morning, she is never sure who she will find there. She is getting to know teacher Dawn and likes her a lot and is hopeful that she will be there today.

It has taken Jamie a long time to let Dawn get close to her because of her experience with teacher Leanne. Jamie loved Leanne and always looked forward to seeing her. But suddenly one day Leanne was not there, and the director took her place. Jamie never knew what happened to Leanne, just that she would not be coming back. Jamie felt very sad and still gets upset when she thinks about Leanne.

Jamie started getting to know Dawn, who finally came to replace Leanne after a series of substitutes. Then just last week, Dawn was not there either. Jamie thought Dawn was gone too, but Dawn came to visit just before nap time and told Jamie that she had to be in the infant room. Jamie did not understand why. The problem was that although Dawn was assigned to Jamie's group, the director had to move her to the infant room last week because a caregiver was sick and the substitute the director finally found was not certified to work with infants. So the substitute replaced Dawn in Jamie's room.

All this shuffling around is nobody's fault, but Jamie is suffering. She is having a hard time feeling connected to anyone in the program.

Now let us contrast the ABC program with the XYZ program. Steffan is a four-year-old in the XYZ child care center. He is well connected to several people in his child care program. Steffan came to the program as a six-month-old and had the same caregiver, Ms. Jones, until he was three. He adored Ms. Jones! Then he moved into the preschool classroom. There he became attached to teacher Janice. He could still visit Ms. Jones in the infant-toddler program, which was adjacent to his preschool room. This is an example where children within a close age group are moving together along with their teachers. Rotating of staff with the students helps maintain continuity for several years. For example, a young infant teacher becomes a toddler teacher and continues to move with the children as they grow and change classrooms.



For a while, Steffan was allowed to move back and forth between the two programs during a transition period. But the more challenging and interesting environment of the preschool classroom called to him, and before too long he was spending most of his time there. Janice knows him very well now—and he knows her. They have a close relationship. And he can still see Ms. Jones. He is glad of that.

Another example of continuity in an early childhood program is one where the environment stays the same and the staff modifies the environment to adjust to the changing needs of the developing children. Jamal has been in the same family child care home since he was a baby. He is now seven years old and considers this his second home. His provider, Barbara, has been in business for about ten years, and sometimes big kids come to visit who used to be in her care, giving Jamal the sense of a large family. Because he is the only child in his family, he has benefited from living in two worlds—the one at home and the one at Barbara's house.

A factor that works against long-term adult–child connections and continuity of care in child care programs is the fact that many early childhood programs follow a school model of grouping children together by grade levels. While this model may work well in primary and secondary school, moving young children too frequently as they reach various milestones during their first few years of life disrupts a child's ability to form the necessary attachments required to feel safe enough to explore and learn crucial social skills. Because grade school children move up every year, some professionals see that as a good way to run early childhood programs too. In fact, some take the idea even further by grouping children according to developmental stages (see Chapter 11). Thus, nonmobile infants may be in one room with one caregiver or set of caregivers. When they begin to crawl, they get moved up to a more sophisticated environment with other, appropriately trained caregivers.

Walking is the next stage that requires a new environment and new specialists. After age two, the moving-up occurs annually. By then, the children have gotten so used to seeing adults come and go that they may well avoid feeling too attached to any one person.

Focus on Inclusion: A Feeling of Belonging

Everyone wants to belong, but children with developmental differences may have greater issues around belonging than other children. Some specialized vocabulary shows the history of helping move children with disabilities in the direction of belonging. First came **mainstreaming**, which means placing children with special needs into programs that serve children who are typically developing. In such programs support for the children with special needs is minimal. The main idea is to put such children into the mainstream of life with the hope that they will adapt. **Integration** takes mainstreaming a giant step further and means that attention is given to the interactions between children with special needs and their typically developing peers so that all children can participate to the greatest degree possible. **Full inclusion** goes even further and means that children regardless of their disability or challenge are always integrated into whatever setting is the **natural environment** of their typically developing peers. The idea is **normalization**, which means that services such as early care and education programs provided to those with special needs are based on circumstances that are as culturally normative as possible.

In programs that successfully adhere to normalization, children with differing abilities are not viewed through the lens of their disability but rather they are viewed as a full member of the group (Brault, 2003). As discussed in Chapter 8, the environment and activities are modified or adapted to help children with differing abilities interact with all the other children in the program.

Inclusion is a right, not just a privilege, according to the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**. Further, the NAEYC endorsed the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood's position statement on inclusion and created one of their own, which supports integration through the stated belief that high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs should be available to all children and their families. Helping *all* children gain a sense of belonging through full inclusion programs benefits children with developmental differences. They have greater opportunity to belong to a community where they can observe and imitate other children becoming more independent and self-reliant. They learn to cope and problem solve while developing social skills, all of which helps them build a positive self-concept. Children with typical development also benefit by recognizing strengths in children with varying abilities and learning to become comfortable with children different from themselves. Helping others and learning to express caring, concern, and compassion can also be a benefit. Both groups benefit by exploring new aspects of friendship.

Should the Program Focus on the Community or on the Individual?

Can you take a group of young children and turn them into a “community”? What does it mean to be a “community”? Can a community consist of one age group, or must it comprise a variety of ages? Can an early childhood program qualify as a community? Should it? The decision to focus on community or individualism is often determined by one’s immediate social environment and one’s cultural values and beliefs. The social-emotional environment can vary with each focus, often defining program curricula and how families approach program selection.

On the one hand, some early childhood educators believe the program should focus on the children as individuals and not stress their membership in the group—whether it be the children and adults in the classroom, the school, the surrounding neighborhood, or society at large. After all, young children are just developing their individuality. Why even introduce the idea that they must belong to a group? These educators worry that the idea of community pressures children to conform rather than to unfold in their own way.

On the other hand, some early childhood educators believe strongly that no child is too young to feel a part of something. The concept and reality of the “group” are important to bring into the picture. Children can be both individuals *and* group members.

If the primary goal of an early childhood program is to establish a sense of community, what kind of community should it be? Should the program become an extension of the community the children experience outside the center? Is the program located in the immediate community in which all or the majority of the children live? (Early childhood programs usually differ from neighborhood-based elementary schools in that they do not often serve the community in which they are located. Families commonly travel distances to take their children to the program that best meets their needs, taste, budget, and often eligibility circumstances.) Even if most or all of the children do come from the community in which the program is located, should it then be an extension of the community? What if the community has a high incidence of violent or drug-related crime?

All these questions must be considered before deciding whether a program should incorporate the concept of community in its curriculum. Of course, there are other options besides focusing on either the individual child or the community. For example, it is possible to focus on the individual *and* community at the same time. Perhaps you want to fashion the program after a family model. In family child care and small center-based programs that serve mixed-age groups, a family model is easier to reproduce than in a program where the children are divided by age, the size of the groups is large, and the setting is more institutional than homelike. However, even in a larger, age-segregated program, a modified version of the family model can be created.

Regarding the family model, there are some questions to consider: do you want the program to replicate the children’s homes? Should the program be as much like home as possible for each child, or should it purposely be different?

Managing Cultural Differences

The social-emotional environment of ECE programs is heavily affected by culture, as you will read in the examples below. Cultural differences can strain relationships between parents and practitioners, but children gain the most when programs implement approaches that increase tolerance and acceptance, reduce bias, and diffuse conflicts through listening and dialogue. With today's increasingly diverse society, such approaches have never been more integral to a child's learning.

It is important to take a look at some basic ideas about culture before exploring the subject further. Culture is invisible. It has been said that one moves in one's culture the way a fish moves through water. The water is so much a part of the fish's experience, that the only time it becomes aware of the water is when it suddenly finds itself surrounded by air.

We are immersed in our culture the way the fish is immersed in water. We may be unaware of how much our culture influences our actions, our thoughts, our very perceptions. Culture determines everything we do—from our personal behavior (the way we sit, stand, walk, cross our legs, or gesture) to our interactive behavior (how close we stand to other people, what kind of eye contact we make, or how we send and interpret messages). Unwritten rules govern every aspect of our behavior—rules many of us do not even think about or notice until someone breaks them. Indeed, violations of our cultural rules may jar us, but they enrich our experiences and expose us to new ways of thinking and being.

Fish die out of water, but humans are luckier; when we find ourselves moving within a culture different from our own, we not only survive but we even grow from the experience. From learning about other cultures, we come to understand ourselves and other people better.



Focus on Diversity: Normal Versus Different

Were you able to identify with either Rebecca or Joy? Did you think of the one you identified with as “normal” or “typical” and the other one as “different” or “atypical”? Because culture is so invisible, some people, especially those from the mainstream culture, think that they do not have a culture. They think of themselves as “regular,” “ordinary,” “normal.” They may label others as “ethnic,” but see themselves as having neither culture nor ethnicity.

But we all have tendencies toward ethnocentric thinking; in other words, we walk in *our own shoes* and see the world from our own ethnic perspective. Most of us are tempted to think our own ways are the *right* ones. We measure the world by our own cultural yardsticks.

Children begin learning to be members of their own culture from birth. Let us look at how two mothers, Rebecca and Joy, socialize their babies: Rebecca holds her baby Emily in her arms. Emily smiles and coos. Rebecca smiles back and imitates her daughter's little noises. She makes her daughter laugh by clicking her tongue and opening her eyes wide with surprise. At her daughter's laugh, Rebecca bounces her slightly. Then they both laugh loudly. Rebecca gives Emily a big warm hug and nuzzles her neck. Emily squeals with delight. Rebecca holds her out at arm's length and jiggles her. Emily squeals some more. Both look happy and excited. Eventually, Emily's responses become less enthusiastic, and Rebecca takes this as a sign that it's time to quiet things down.

Joy, on the other hand, takes the opposite approach to her daughter Suzie. At Suzie's first smiles and coos, Joy responds warmly, smiling back and talking quietly to her. But when Suzie gets excited and starts to kick, Joy tones down her facial expressions and talks in even quieter tones. Instead of getting excited herself, she becomes more subdued. In contrast to Rebecca, who continued to heighten her response and stimulate Emily more until she had had enough, Joy calms Suzie down. She holds her still and makes soothing, murmuring noises. When Suzie starts bouncing, Joy holds her even closer and rocks her gently, humming a slow, rhythmic lullaby. She gently strokes Suzie's back in a way she knows will settle her down. It works.

These two mothers have very different intentions, but both behave in culturally appropriate ways. Rebecca purposely engaged her daughter; the more animated the baby became, the more delighted the mother was. Rebecca likes to see her baby excited; she thinks such stimulation is good for her. She enjoys lively interactions herself, so she promotes them. Rebecca is also sensitive to her daughter's signals that tell her she has had enough stimulation, and she stops before it goes too far. With her lively approach, Rebecca is helping her daughter become a member of her culture—a culture that values excitement, stimulation, and lively exchanges.

Joy, on the other hand, thought her daughter Suzie was in danger of being overstimulated. She worries about babies getting excited. She thinks calm, quiet babies are better off than noisy, animated babies. In her culture, tranquility and serenity are two highly valued qualities. Joy is teaching Suzie how to be peaceful. She is teaching her about equanimity.

Is one of these mothers right and the other wrong? You cannot answer that question without taking cultural context into consideration. See the *Focus on Diversity* box on page 258 for further discussion on this subject.

Imagine that Emily is growing up to be the lively child her mother expected and that Suzie is developing into a calm, composed young girl. How might the two girls respond to preschool? What Emily finds boring and uninteresting, Suzie might find overstimulating, frightening, or upsetting. Of course, such a prediction is too simplistic. It is impossible to tell how two children will turn out just by knowing how they were socialized as infants. Genetics enters the picture. Also, there are individual differences within a culture. People who share one culture are not all the same! Rebecca's people are not all lively, and Joy's are not all placid. The variations may be infinite, yet there is still a cultural thread that holds it all together.

Our individual values, manners, and ways of being are influenced by our culture. Culture is the framework on which all else hangs.

Certain aspects of culture are quite visible—food, dress, music, art, literature, holidays. Some aspects of culture show in behavior—including the way people raise their children. Child-rearing practices are often based on cultural beliefs about what children need, how they learn and develop, and even what their basic nature is.

In any early childhood program, there may be several cultures operating at the same time. There are the different **home cultures** of the children, as well as the home cultures of the staff members or providers (which may or may not come into play, depending on their training). For staff members or providers trained as early childhood educators, there is a third culture—namely, the **early childhood culture**.

At present, the early childhood culture reflects, to a great extent, its European roots, but the heavy emphasis of European American culture has begun to wane slightly. In 1989, the NAEYC published *The Antibias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*, which brought racial and cultural bias to national attention (Derman-Sparks and The ABC Task Force, 1989). Since then, the NAEYC has remained a steadfast supporter of inclusion and cultural respect and diversity within communities. Through its various position statements, the NAEYC has encouraged practitioners to practice antibias approaches that promote diversity in all its forms. The most recent iteration of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, guides professional decision making based on three areas of knowledge: what is developmentally appropriate, what is individually appropriate, and what is culturally appropriate (Bredekamp et al., 2022).



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Children are individuals as well as members of their peer group, community, or culture.

National professional leadership and grassroots implementation are effecting changes at every level. The early childhood culture is expanding beyond its European American roots to increasingly reflect the diverse cultures of the many professionals and the families they serve. Teacher training programs are expanding their views, and early childhood educators are becoming more responsive to families' cultural differences and their varied child-rearing practices.

The Child's Home Culture

Children bring their culture to the early childhood program, but what they bring may or may not be recognized by staff members. Previous chapters have explored the differing views on promoting independence versus interdependence in young children, but the following section is designed to help you understand parental attitudes and behaviors in the context of a larger cultural picture.

Cultural Priorities: Independence or Interdependence? Marion Cowee tells about her experience with a mother who stressed interdependence more than she did. See the *Voices of Experience* box on page 262. Newborn babies are faced with two major tasks: (1) to become independent individuals and (2) to establish connections with others. The parents' job is to help their children with these tasks.

It seems logical that parents would focus on both, but they do not. Most parents either consciously or unconsciously pick one task or the other. Their choice depends on their goals, which are often determined by their culture. The result is that the child comes to define "self" as his or her own culture defines the concept. Two such definitions are

- The self is a separate, autonomous individual whose job it is to grow and develop into the best he or she can be in order to become part of a larger group. Personal fulfillment and/or achievement are all-important.
- The self is inherently connected, not separate, and is defined in terms of relationships. Obligation to others is more important than personal fulfillment or achievement.

What kinds of differences show up when one parent encourages independence and another one focuses on reinforcing connections? Parents who place a bigger value on independence are likely to encourage early self-help skills. They hand their baby a spoon when the baby first reaches for one. They teach their baby to sleep alone in a crib. Self-reliance, self-assertion, and self-expression are the goals of parents who focus on independence. The end result of reaching all these goals is self-esteem. Such children adapt well to early childhood programs that promote the same goals.

Independence-focused parents also teach their children to connect with others, but they put far less emphasis on developing such skills. "He will learn to share when he is ready," says the parent who believes his or her child must become an individual and understand the concept of ownership before he can learn to share his possessions.

Parents who are more concerned about their child's ability to maintain connections have a different view. They worry about their child becoming too independent, so they focus on creating interdependent relationships. An Asian woman in a conference once explained to me how dependence operates in a cycle: "First you are dependent on your parents and later they are dependent on you. That's the way it should be."

Sometimes parents who focus on interdependence downplay ownership and insist on sharing from day one. They may have little concern about self-help skills and continue spoonfeeding their children for several years—sometimes up to age four. Feeding times represent opportunities for the parent and child to connect—opportunities these parents are not in a hurry to give up. Some teachers would be shocked by a three-year-old wanting to be fed. Likewise, parents who expect their child to be fed at child care may be surprised at and disappointed with a program's policy on developing self-help skills.

Whereas parents who stress independence look down on "coddling" or "babying" children, the parent focused on interdependence sees nothing negative about such terms. Doing things for their children, even things they can do themselves, gives parents warm, positive feelings. They even go so far as to discourage independence when children start trying to assert themselves. There is a word in Japanese that means "to graciously accept help." The idea is to teach independence-minded children to learn to let others help them even if they do not need the help.



Voices of Experience: Keeping a Positive Relationship in the Face of Differences

I thought Yin was overprotective. She came every lunch time and spoon-fed her large-for-her-age, robust, four-year-old daughter Casey. I tried in gentle ways to convince Yin that Casey could take care of herself and that these self-help skills were important for her to learn if she was going to be successful in kindergarten the next year. Her mom continued to come every day to feed her. I told Yin that Casey was the only child whose parent came in to feed her. Yin said she was concerned that Casey wasn't eating all of her food and continued to come every day to feed her. I realized I was fighting a losing battle so I said to Yin jokingly, "you won't be able to do this once she's in kindergarten." We ended the school year with a positive relationship despite the fact that Casey was still being spoon-fed by her mom. A year later Yin and Casey came back to visit and I inquired about how lunch time was going at the elementary school. Yin proudly announced that she had gotten a job at the school as a lunchroom supervisor! She no longer spoon-fed her daughter, but she did make sure she got enough to eat. This experience taught me how powerful culture is; it is not something that can be willed away by logic or guilt. By a unilateral decree on my part, I could have forced an important part of a family's culture to be absent at my school, but would have destroyed the trust and joy that this family experienced.

—Marion Cowee



Children who grow up in “other-centered” families learn to help each other rather than focus only on themselves.

Parents who promote interdependent relationships are less adamant about babies learning to sleep through the night alone. They are less anxious to promote self-expression, self-help, *even self-esteem*. In fact, any trait beginning with the prefix “self-” is suspect. These parents don’t want to raise *selfish* children, they want to raise children who put others first.

The independence and interdependence approaches represent two different ways of looking at getting needs met. The parents who advocate independence teach their children that it is their responsibility to take care of their own needs as they become more capable, but children who grow up in “other-centered” families learn that the needs of others should be their focus, not their own needs. They will get their needs met, however, because while they are taking care of others, others are taking care of them. Needs are met in both types of homes, but the process in each is very different.¹

Adults who are independence-minded and adults who are “other-centered” often have deep misunderstandings and disagreements with each other. The former will criticize the preschooler who stands and waits for her parent to put her coat on: “There’s no excuse for a child to be so helpless.” The latter will criticize the parent who excuses his preschool-age son for not properly greeting his grandparents: “There’s no excuse for being disrespectful to elders.” What to one is a minor issue is seen as a moral issue by the other.

Of course, most children, no matter how they are raised, do grow up to become both independent individuals *and* people who create and maintain relationships. Children accomplish both major tasks, even if their parents only focused on one. Indeed, parents expect their children to be both independent and connected, but they work harder on the trait they believe to be most important and leave to chance the trait they are less concerned about (or they work on it hit or miss). Most parents never make a conscious decision about what to focus on because it comes from a deeply embedded cultural value.

Oppression. There are some parents who do make a conscious decision to guide their children to become more independent or interdependent; their deliberate goal is to counteract the effects of oppression, such as racism. One parent focuses on firmly establishing her child as the member of a group, a part of her people, rather than glorifying the idea of being a unique individual; the parent sees the group as a buffer between the child and harsh reality. When children receive negative messages about themselves and their people from society at large, they need the group to validate a different reality about themselves. Parents prepare their children for the harsh reality of how the world will treat them when they leave the security of home by connecting them firmly with their own people. Their parenting methods relate to this goal of connectedness.

In contrast, some parents who are members of oppressed groups take the opposite approach. They teach their children to be independent and to value their individuality as a way of standing up to oppression. In either case, the parents' motive is not based primarily on culture but is rather a response to history and current social conditions.²

The Home Culture and How It Relates to the Early Childhood Culture. The challenge for the early childhood educator is to become more aware of what parents' motives are, how culture operates, and what else, such as oppression, might be influencing the parents' child-rearing practices. With this awareness should come respect for others, which brings us full circle in this chapter, which started with a look at respect. In addition to being accepting and respectful, early childhood educators should also help parents understand their own behavior better. Sometimes parents' motives, goals, and behavior are inconsistent. If so, the early childhood teacher can help the parent discover and deal with these inconsistencies.

For example, a new mother and her four-year-old son arrive in a center-based program. During the intake interview, the mother tells the director that her son needs strict discipline and that it is important to spank him when he misbehaves. The director respectfully explains that spanking is not allowed. The mother insists that it is a cultural issue with her and that the director must tell the teachers to spank her child or he will become wild and unruly and fail to respect them. In the mother's mind, this behavior is the worst of all sins.

The director, by taking her stance on spanking, is not only following her legal mandate but is also reflecting the early childhood culture, which she has taken on in addition to her own culture. Before entering the field of early childhood education, this director used to spank her own children. She believed in spanking; in fact, she thought it was a vital ingredient of behavioral control. Now, she looks at discipline as guidance instead of behavior control, and she takes a very different view on spanking. She has *become* a member of the early childhood culture.

As the intake interview continues, the director discovers that the parent has pacifist goals for her child. She takes a strong nonviolent stand. Gently, the director points out that the mother's use of spanking will work in opposition to her stated goals. The mother is not convinced at first, but the discussions continue with the director hoping the mother will come to see that spanking defeats her goal of teaching her child nonviolence.

The Dynamic Nature of Culture

Culture is not set in stone. Individuals change, families change, and so do cultures. They never remain static, especially when they bump up against other cultures. Culture is always evolving.

Through cultures change, early childhood educators continuously review the role the program takes in the evolution of a child's culture. Some children arrive with a home culture that differs from the culture they encounter at the early childhood program. Whether the children keep their own cultural perspective, expand or modify it, or lose it altogether and take on the program's culture depends on many factors, including the unspoken messages of the dominant culture and the media. Another factor is the children's age. The older the children are upon entering a culturally diverse program, the less likely they are to lose their own culture, particularly if they are well rooted in their home culture and language. It is the younger child who is more susceptible to the influence of the dominant culture.

Infant caregivers need to be especially sensitive to diversity issues. It is easy to overlook subtle differences in caregiver styles that may have a great impact on babies. Consider this example. Angel's big brown eyes stare at her caregiver Kimberly. Angel's chocolate-colored face contrasts with the paleness of Kimberly's arm, where she lies nestled. Kimberly speaks to Angel in soft tones. How does Angel experience this? She seems a little uncomfortable. Is she noticing that Kimberly's way of holding her is different from her mother's? Kimberly's voice and body language are different too.

Babies are adaptable. They are held different ways by different people. Why can we not just assume that Angel will get used to Kimberly and everything will be fine? Many early childhood professionals believe that early exposure to a multicultural environment makes a child more open later to diversity. In truth, we do not know exactly how babies become members of their culture. We do not know if early exposure to diverse cultures makes them more open or more confused. If indeed they become confused, we do not know if they will outgrow the confusion and become bicultural (or even multicultural)—that is not an inevitable result. Some children who do not receive strong cultural messages may grow up culturally inept. Commonly, children take on the mainstream culture and reject their own culture.

Here is another, more dramatic example of an infant responding to diverse practices. Michael is excited when he sees a bowl and spoon. He kicks his legs and waves his arms, but when Helen puts him in the high chair and places a bowl of finger food in front of him, he just sits there and makes no attempt to feed himself. He looks distressed at first. Finally, he slumps over in his seat with a glazed look in his eyes. His mother explains later that he was taught early not to touch his food with his hands. In fact, he used to be fed on his mother's lap, wrapped tightly in a blanket to prevent him from interfering with her. He obviously does not know how to respond to this new arrangement.

In Michael's family, independence is not a goal. This family believes that children are born with a stubborn independent streak (stronger in some than in others) that must be weakened. The parents' child-rearing practices are designed to create closeness and interdependence. They worry that their child will become too independent and no longer need them. Family closeness and interconnectedness are priorities, not self-sufficiency, which they think comes naturally anyway, whether you train children for it or not.

The ways in which a baby is cared for are a major factor in his or her ongoing socialization and the development of his or her future adult personality. Who the baby is (self-identity) and how he or she relates to others are influenced by the early months and years (Lally, 1995).

It's also important to understand that parental child-rearing practices are designed to prepare children for adulthood in the family's culture (Rogoff, 2003). Caregivers need to be aware of the possible effects they may have on infants whose backgrounds differ from theirs.

The increasing number of infant programs underscores the importance of considering the effect of an infant's exposure to cross-cultural settings. Infants are just beginning to learn their own culture. What happens to the infant—who has not incorporated all those unwritten rules and behaviors—who spends her days with people not of her home culture? Will she automatically become bicultural? Maybe. But many factors are at play, including unspoken messages by the members of the dominant culture. (Although this factor has a greater impact on older children, it is hard to say at what age children begin to take in unspoken messages.) If children learn to look at their home culture as inferior, they may take a negative view of themselves. Naturally, they want to be part of the "better culture," and they may reject parts of themselves and their families.



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Of course, issues of cultural differences are not limited to infancy. So much attention has been paid to infancy because that is where it all starts. However, the issues of cultural differences and the need for cultural sensitivity prevail throughout early childhood education and beyond. For example, children of any age who come from a culture that regards pride as a great weakness, even a sin, will have problems in a classroom where personal pride is emphasized. How will these children handle such a double bind? Will they learn to feel pride at school and turn off those feelings at home, or will they choose one cultural view over the other? How many will take home the teacher's view and resist their family's teachings from then on? And if they resist this one aspect of their home culture, will they resist other aspects as well? Imagine what it does to children to be put in such a position.

For children in child care, cultural sensitivity and responsiveness can make a difference as to whether they remain firmly rooted in their culture, become more a part of the mainstream culture, become bicultural, or vacillate between cultures without feeling a sense of belonging (Phillips, 1995).

The Evolution of the Early Childhood Culture

Early childhood educators must learn to be respectful of differing practices yet still be professionals and share their expertise. It is important to recognize that families change when they come in contact with early childhood educators from different backgrounds, but the educators change too. Acculturation is a two-way process. Some old values and practices remain intact, some remain but are modified, and some are shed for newer ones (Patel, Power, and Bhavnagri, 1996). This process opens up children, families, and early childhood educators to operate flexibly in two or more cultures.

Culture is not static. The early childhood culture is susceptible to change just like every other culture. If early childhood educators leave their minds open enough, sometimes they are the ones who are transformed when they bump up against different ways of thinking and being. Being an effective early childhood educator involves give and take. Sometimes we teach others, and sometimes we learn ourselves. When an early childhood educator embraces a different perspective and changes a program practice, he or she expands the parameters of the early childhood culture.

A Story to End With

I once attended a seminar at an institute for teacher trainers on cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood education. The leaders talked about the “early childhood culture,” but I was not so sure that such a thing existed. One exercise, however, proved to me and the group that, indeed, there *is* an early childhood culture that binds professionals together.

The leaders divided the participants into three groups. The first group’s task was to focus on parents; the second, on teachers; and the third, on children: the directions were written on three cards and were quite simple. “List the characteristics of a good _____ and those of a bad _____.” The blank spaces read “parent,” “teacher,” or “child,” depending on the group.

The group that got the parent card went right to work. They did not have any trouble making their lists. The group with the teacher card also did not have any problems. It was clear to them what the distinguishing characteristics were of a good and a bad teacher.

I was in the group with the child card. We had a terrible time completing our task. First, we

agreed that there were no “bad” children; it is not the child who is bad but the behavior. But then we argued about using the word “bad” at all—unacceptable behavior, unsocialized behavior, aggressive behavior, but not *bad* behavior.

We were feeling frustrated and indignant about this assignment. We had not yet figured out how to handle either our feelings or the task when we were notified that the exercise was over and it was time to report back to the larger group. We had to make a quick decision.

When it was our turn to share our two lists, we explained that we had refused to do the assignment because we agreed there is no such thing as a “bad” child. “All children are good,” we said emphatically. The leaders who thought up the assignment nodded wisely. “See,” they said, “That’s the early childhood culture operating!” What we learned was that we agreed because we unknowingly shared a culture that arose from our professional training and experiences. If the group had been made up of individuals randomly picked off the street, they might not have been in such agreement that there are no “bad” children and not even “bad” behavior.

Summary

The social-emotional environment of the early childhood program should provide respect, warmth, nurturance, acceptance, protection, and responsiveness. But those qualities alone are not enough to create a healthy, safe, “growthful” environment; continuity is the final key ingredient. Two obstacles to continuity encountered in the early childhood field are personnel turnover rates and the yearly advancement of children from one classroom to another. Provisions must be made for children with special needs. Several cultural considerations must be taken into mind when planning the social-emotional environment of the early childhood classroom. The first consideration is whether to focus the program on the individual

child or on the community—or even whether to fashion the program after a family model.

Another cultural aspect the early childhood program must take into consideration is the difference in child-rearing philosophies between families who focus on independence and those who value interdependence. The challenge is learning how to respect the home culture while fulfilling the professional responsibilities of the early childhood culture. Because culture continually evolves, the home culture of the families—and even those of staff members—will not remain exactly the same; nor will the culture of early childhood education.

Reflection Questions

1. Remember a time when you were treated disrespectfully. What happened? How did you feel? Remember a time when you were treated with respect. What happened? How did you feel? How can you use your own experience to help you treat young children with respect?
2. How aware are you of the social-emotional nature of the environments where you spend your time? Can you separate the effects of the physical aspects from the social-emotional aspects? What is an example of an environment's social-emotional aspect that has a negative effect on you? A positive effect? How does the social-emotional environment of this classroom affect you? How would you change it, if you could, to create a more positive effect?
3. Where do you feel most comfortable, safe, happy, and creative today? How much are your feelings a result of the social-emotional environment? Do you have ideas about how the physical and social-emotional environment interact to make you feel "at home"?
4. Name your culture. If you have difficulties, perhaps you do not think that you have a culture. You do. Everyone has a culture whether they are aware of it or not. Considering that you do have a culture, how do you think that you learned the rules of that culture?
5. How big a role do you think your culture plays in determining which social-emotional environments make you feel comfortable and at home?
6. What are your experiences of clashes between "community" and "individuality"? Are the goals of building community entirely compatible with learning to be an individual? Where do individual rights end and community rights begin? What are your ideas, feelings, and experiences on this subject?
7. Did your parent(s) and/or family of origin have strong independence priorities or stronger interdependence priorities? How do you know? What specific factors in the way you were raised tell you that one or the other was the top priority? Why do you think your parent(s) and/or family had the priorities that they did?
8. What are your experiences with oppression? What do your experiences lead you to believe about how to work with children to overcome the effects of oppression?

Terms to Know

How many of the following words can you use in a sentence?
Do you know what they mean?

mainstreaming 256
integration 256
full inclusion 256
natural environment 256

normalization 256
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 256
home culture 260
early childhood culture 260

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Endnotes

1. A project carried on by WestEd in California for a number of years is called *Bridging Cultures*, which looks closely at the issues of independence and interdependence using a framework of individualism and collectivism. A number of books and articles related to this project are included in the references. The latest focus of this ongoing project is early care and education. This

project resulted in a training module. See Zepeda, M., Gonzalez-Mena, J., Rothstein-Fisch, C., and Trumbull, E. (2012). *Bridging cultures in early care and education*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203063064>

2. This information on oppression comes from a personal communication from Intisar Shareef, Ed.D.

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