

Culturally Competent Child Advocacy

In the context of the CASA volunteer role, cultural competence is the ability to work effectively with people from a variety of backgrounds. It entails being aware and respectful of the cultural norms, values, traditions, and parenting styles of those with whom you work. Striving to be culturally competent means cultivating an open mind and new skills and meeting people where they are, rather than making them conform to your standards.

Each child and each family is made up of a combination of cultural, familial, and personal traits. In working with families, you need to learn about an individual's or family's culture. When in doubt, ask the people you are working with. It might feel awkward at first, but learning how to ask questions respectfully is a vital skill to develop as you grow in cultural competence. Once people understand that you sincerely want to learn and be respectful, they are usually very generous with their help.

Developing cultural competence is a lifelong process through which you'll make some mistakes, get to know some wonderful people in deeper ways, and become a more effective CASA volunteer.

Tips on How to Become More Culturally Competent

1. Learn about your culture and values, focusing on how they inform your attitudes, behavior, and verbal and nonverbal communication.
2. Don't place "good" and "right" values in your own culture exclusively; acknowledge that the beliefs and practices of other cultures are just as valid.
3. Question your cultural assumptions: Check their reality, rather than immediately acting on them.
4. Accept cultures different from your own and understand that those differences can be learned.
5. Learn to contrast other cultures and values with your own.
6. Learn to assess whether differences of opinion are based on style (communication, learning, or conflict) or substance (issue).
7. Practice the communication loop; don't rely on your perceptions of what is being said.
8. Examine the circle in which you live and play (this reflects your choice of peers). Expand your circle to experience other cultures, values, and beliefs.
9. Continue to read and learn about other cultures. Do your homework: Know something about another culture group prior to approaching them.

- Follow appropriate protocol: Know and demonstrate respectful behavior based on the values of the group.
 - Use collaborative networks—church (spiritual), community, or other natural support groups of that culture.
 - Practice respect.
10. Understand that any change or new learning experience can be challenging, unsettling, and tiresome; give yourself a break and allow for mistakes.
 11. Remember the reciprocal nature of relationships—give something back.
 12. See multiculturalism as an exciting, fulfilling, and resourceful way to live.
 13. Have fun and keep your sense of humor!

Adapted from materials developed by CASA for Children, Inc., Portland, Oregon.

10 Benefits of Practicing Culturally Competent Child Advocacy

1. Ensures that case issues are viewed from the cultural perspective of the child and/or family:
 - Takes into account cultural norms, practices, traditions, intrafamilial relationships, roles, kinship ties, and other culturally appropriate values
 - Advocates for demonstrated sensitivity to this cultural perspective on the part of caseworkers, service providers, caregivers, or others involved with the child and family
2. Ensures that the child's long-term needs are viewed from a culturally appropriate perspective:
 - Takes into account the child's need to develop and maintain a positive self-image and cultural heritage
 - Takes into account the child's need to positively identify and interact with others from his/her cultural background
3. Prevents cultural practices from being mistaken for child maltreatment or family dysfunction
4. Assists with identifying when parents are truly not complying with a court order and when the problem is culturally inappropriate or noninclusive service delivery

5. Contributes to more accurate assessment of the child's welfare, family system, available support systems, placement needs, services needed, and delivery
6. Decreases cross-cultural communication clashes and opportunities for misunderstandings
7. Allows the family to utilize culturally appropriate solutions in problem solving
8. Encourages participation of family members in seeking assistance or support
9. Recognizes, appreciates, and incorporates cultural differences in ways that promote cooperation
10. Allows all participants to be heard objectively

Adapted from a document created by CASA for Children, Inc., Portland, Oregon.

Stereotyping vs. Cultural Competence

Stereotypes are rigid and inflexible. Stereotypes hold even when a person is presented with evidence contrary to the stereotype. Stereotypes are harmful because they limit people's potential, perpetuate myths, and are gross generalizations about a particular group. For instance, a person might believe that people who wear large, baggy clothes shoplift. Teenagers wear large, baggy jackets; therefore, teenagers shoplift. Such stereotypes can adversely affect your interactions with children and others in your community. Even stereotypes that include "positive" elements (e.g., "they" are quite industrious) can be harmful because the stereotypes are rigid, limiting, and generalized.

Unlike stereotyping, cultural competence can be compared to making an educated hypothesis. An educated hypothesis contains what you understand about cultural norms and the social, political, and historical experiences of the children and families with whom you work. You might hypothesize, for example, that a Jewish family is not available for a meeting on Yom Kippur, or that they would not want to eat pork. However, you recognize and allow for individual differences in the expression and experience of a culture; for instance, some Jewish people eat pork and still are closely tied to their Jewish faith or heritage. Another example might be that some African American families celebrate Kwanzaa, while others do not.

As an advocate, you need to examine your biases and recognize they are based on your own life and do not usually reflect what is true for the stereotyped groups. Everyone has certain biases. Everyone stereotypes from time to time. Developing cultural competence is an ongoing process of recognizing and overcoming these biases by thinking flexibly and finding sources of information about those who are different from you.

Volunteer Training Curriculum, The National CASA Association

Keeping Native Children Connected....

Document Author: Prepared by Kimberly Martus, J.D., Director, Alaska Tribal CASA Program and Diane Payne, Children's Justice Specialist, Tribal Law & Policy Institute, updated, May 2002
Date Posted: 6/02

The long-term well being of Native children is undeniably related to their sense of identity as Natives. Childhood paves the way to adult identity...NATIVE CHILDREN are Natives forever. Thus, it is critical that a determination of what is in "the best interest" of Native children address their needs as children as well as development of positive relationships with Native individuals and communities that will inevitably be a part of their future lifeways. The following ideas are collected from several workshop presentations we have done, but they are not exhaustive. Hopefully, these will provide guidance as you seek to advocate for a Native child.

Some Suggestions For Keeping Native Children Connected....

Develop a relationship with the child's parents: learn about their foods, religious beliefs and practices, about family cultural activity;

Develop relationships with other adult Native people who can provide information about Native culture generally and, preferably, about the child's culture;

Socialize with Native families - most cultural and social activities in Native communities are intended for family participation (all ages are welcome);

Ask Tribal workers to assist with the child's needs, whether it be services or social interactions;

Learn about the child's family and community history and make information available to the child's caretakers, service providers, and keep important information for the child to have when older (i.e. Tribal newsletters, articles about elders, family members and Tribal issues);

Learn about child's cultural practices and belief systems through videos or articles recommended by the National Indian Child Welfare Association and Tribal workers (do not assume all "historical" information is accurate - check with a reputable source recommended by Tribe or Tribal organizations);

Make an effort to become connected to the child's Tribe - get on mailing list for events, ask for appropriate event to become acquainted, meet with Tribal workers coming through town, etc. (in-person contact is always the best!);

Learn about child's entitlements through the Tribe, i.e. make sure child gets enrolled or listed as a Tribal member; gather information about the child's ancestry, etc.;

Develop resources for child within the community - school programs for Natives (Indian Education & JOM), dance/drum groups, Native Youth Olympics, Native church, Native basketball team, culture camps, Native youth leadership events, Native Head Start, etc.

Use Tribal Court to handle adoptions.

Additions made at the National CASA conference in San Diego, April 2002:
See if there is a Tribal college in your area and find out what is offered regarding Tribal culture and history; see what instructors are used at the local college on these issues and invite them to do a presentation at your CASA or Foster Parent training sessions.

Ask the Tribe for, or contact a local museum or historical society for videos on Tribal history and language.

Contact the local museum (near the child's Tribe) about artists, storytellers and other culture-bearers that you could put in touch with the child. Encourage foster parents to bring child to see these people at performances or exhibits.

Tribal Head Start and Infant Learning Programs often have cultural information and teaching tools that they will share with foster parents and CASAs.

High Schools often have "culture clubs" where you may locate a "big brother or big sister" for the Native child, or you may find out about events that it would benefit the child to attend.

Indian Health Service funded clinics and hospitals have information about the Tribal heritage of beneficiaries.

To identify appropriate cultural events for the child and foster parents to attend, ask if there is a Tribal non-profit agency in the area that provides job training, social services, elder services or other consumer-type programs and get on their mailing list.

Make sure court orders preserve the child's right to receive per capita payments, inherit land or other Tribal benefits.

Local Resources

Klamath Tribes
783-2219

www.klamathtribes.org

National Child Welfare Association
(503) 222-4044

www.nicwa.org

Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)