



STRENGTHENING THE VOICES OF CASA STATEWIDE

Connecting Across Cultures In Collaborative Family Engagement

It's important to keep in mind that we are often working with families who have different cultural backgrounds than our own, and that the ability to communicate and work effectively across cultural lines is central to the success of Collaborative Family Engagement work. Regardless of whether or not we identify as the same race, socio-economic class, religion, gender or sexual orientation as the families and youth we're working with, our life experience and stories will almost always be different. Learning to approach these connections with an open mind is key to building trust and working together to advocate for the best interests of the children we serve.

In many Texas family courts, our judges keep a list of questions at their bench designed to help them "protect against implicit bias." It reminds them to pause and ask themselves:

- What assumptions have I made about people based on their cultural identity, profession or background?
- How might my assumptions influence my decision-making?
- How have I challenged any assumptions I might have made based on cultural identity, profession or background?

We have a powerful voice in the experiences and outcomes for the families and youth we work with, and this comes with a great responsibility to ensure we're continually working to practice and expand our cultural awareness skills. In this chapter, we'll explore how we can apply these kinds of questions to our Collaborative Family Engagement work and ensure that our efforts to engage families are inclusive, respectful and welcoming to all.

Breaking Down Dynamics of Disproportionality and Dissonance

Disproportionality is the experience of overrepresentation or underrepresentation of various groups in different social, political, or economic institutions. For example,

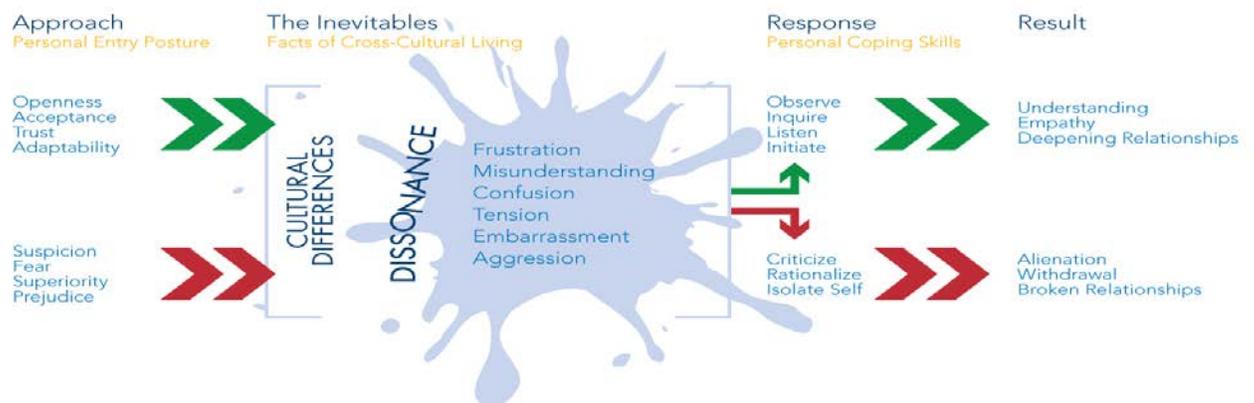


women in the United States are overrepresented as single heads of households, while men are underrepresented in that group -- a trend we often see in the child welfare system. Another form of disproportionality that stands out in our child welfare system relates to race: research shows that White children are underrepresented in state custody, while children of color are overrepresented. Although African American children make up 14% of the child population in the country, they constitute 28% of the children in foster care. Additionally, the average length of time in foster care for African American children is longer than the average length of stay for White children. So how does racial disproportionality relate to our work with Collaborative Family Engagement?

Because of these dynamics, families from communities of color may be more likely to have distrust in these systems and feel they are being targeted in ways that White, middle class families are not. Meanwhile, long standing histories of racial inequity, oppression, discrimination, stereotyping, and bias have created ongoing forms of cross-cultural conflict, including feelings of frustration, misunderstanding and tension. We'll call this cultural *dissonance*.

Given these dynamics of dissonance, how do we as advocates work to communicate effectively with families from all cultural backgrounds? If we enter into these dynamics with openness, trust and adaptability, our odds of remaining in positive relationship while honoring difference are dramatically increased. So how do we do that? Check out this road map of do's and don'ts for cross cultural communication:

APPROACHING DIFFERENCES



This diagram is available as a bookmark through the InterVarsity Store at tiny.cc/bkmmk

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While experiencing some cultural dissonance is often inevitable in cross cultural encounters, we can absolutely cultivate a positive approach and learn healthy responses to dissonance. In your interactions with families, try your best to stay on the **green-line arrows** and avoid the **red-line arrows**. Rather than prioritize our own emotions and perspectives, this tool can equip us to skillfully and effectively engage families from different cultures than our own. When we inevitably encounter conflict, tension, misunderstanding or dissonance, rather than responding by **criticizing, rationalizing and isolating ourselves (red-line)**, we can intentionally choose to respond by **observing, inquiring, listening and initiating (green-line)**. This diagram helps us to navigate through dissonance and move toward positive results on the **green-line arrows**: understanding, empathy and deepening relationships. Developing understanding, empathy and positive relationships is so important to our mission within the Collaborative Family Engagement process!

Cultural Humility Is a Lifelong Process for All

As we’ve acknowledged, our roles within this system give us a powerful voice in the experiences and outcomes for the families and youth we work with, and so it’s important that we’re continually working to practice and expand our cultural awareness skills. One way we can practice these skills is by making a commitment to be aware of how we react and respond during times of conflict. When we are offered feedback about an experience or exchange within our Collaborative Family Engagement work, it’s important we’re prepared to receive this feedback with openness and a positive willingness to learn and grow. This isn’t always easy and can sometimes feel uncomfortable, but it’s critical to our commitment as advocates to see things from new and different perspectives in order to best respond to each child’s and family’s unique needs. How do we put that commitment into action? Check out the chart below and consider these questions:

- Have you witnessed any practices from the **red list** or experienced someone acting toward you in this way?
- What practices are you already currently using from the **green list**?
- What practices from the **red list** do you think you need to work on avoiding?
- What practices from the **green list** do you think are most effective? Which ones do you plan on emphasizing in your work with families?

Red Arrows: Ways to <u>Avoid</u> Learning	Green Arrows: Ways to Learn
Denial - "I didn't say or do anything offensive."	Let go of Unproductive Reactions: I notice and let go of feelings of defensiveness, anger, fear,



	embarrassment, shame, guilt that interfere with my capacity to listen to what you are saying.
Dismissal - "You're overreacting." "You're too sensitive." "You're blowing this out of proportion."	Listen: I focus on understanding what you are telling me and ask for clarity when I do not understand
Explaining it Away: "You're misunderstanding my actions, I didn't mean it like that."	I receive your feedback as a gift: I understand that when someone offers me information, I can be more conscious of my role and the impact of my beliefs, words and actions. I welcome feedback and do not take it lightly or ignore it.
Guilt: "I'm ashamed that you think I meant any harm" "I feel awful and am having strong feelings or thoughts about how bad I am at this."	Take a new perspective: I try to step back from the situation and how I advise someone else in the same dynamic. I try to see the situation from your point of view.
Avoidance: "I can't work with this family anymore." "This family is too difficult"	Genuine Apology: I apologize for what I specifically did that resulted in conflict or mistrust.

Adapted from handout at Journey Conference on White Ethnic Identity (GLW), Fall 2005, author unknown

Sensitivity to Diversity vs. Stereotyping

Sometimes talking about cultural differences can feel too abstract and intangible, so we want to share some examples of ways that our values, norms, experiences, and ways of relating to others can vary based on our cultural and ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, it's so important not to make assumptions about the people that we're working with -- because no one likes to feel like they're being stereotyped, right? Please keep in mind that these are generalizations that will not apply to every family who shares this identity, but are some ideas of differences we can be aware of:

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Latino families:



- Rich extended family relationships
- The role of spirituality and religious practices, specifically with Catholicism.
- The role of social clubs
- The history of racism and discrimination in the United States and the impact of anti-immigration messaging in the media; for undocumented people, a possible fear of involvement with organizations connected to law enforcement and courts due to the threat of deportation.

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Black/African American families:

- The value of education and role of discipline for youth
- Strong connection to religion and church community
- The value of extended family support
- The value of coping skills in hard times
- The history of racism and discrimination in the United States tracing back to slavery, Jim Crow, segregation and the civil rights movement
- Awareness of anti-black stereotypes including the “strong” black maternal figure
- Awareness of cultural appropriation especially of language from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) which may be experienced as condescending or belittling

Consider some of these common values and experiences for White or European American families:

- Individualism and perfectionism seen as strengths
- Punctuality and politeness seen as forms of respect
- Success often symbolized by financial independence, home ownership, and material security
- Focus on values of law and order; may more readily trust law enforcement and government
- May feel entitled to information or control of a process
- Connection to church community or neighborhood network

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Native American/American Indian families:

- The impact of a long history of Native American children being removed from their families, which resulted in the the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978.



- Under ICWA, tribes must be given notice of any custody proceeding involving one of their children. Additionally, states must use Native American expert witnesses, tribal children should be placed in Indian homes and tribes be allowed to intervene in the state court proceedings.
- Child rearing and discipline often rooted in the spiritual belief system.
- Did you know? There are more than 500 American Indian tribes and sub-clans.

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Asian and Pacific Islander Families:

- Respect for elders and expectation to care for older generations
- Be aware of the "Model minority myth" which refers to the *stereotype* that Asian families pressure their children to excel in academics and strive for prestigious career paths. Keep in mind that there is a wide range of socio-economic realities and education access for API families.
- Emphasized cultural values include interpersonal harmony and collectivity.
- Impact of anti-immigration messaging in the media and for undocumented people a possible fear of involvement with organizations connected to law enforcement and courts.
- Did you know? There are 60 distinct Asian or Pacific Islander groups.

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Mixed Race or Multiracial Families:

- Families are more and more integrated across racial identities; adults and children may have a complex background of racial identity and parentage.
- Do your best to not make assumptions about someone's racial identity. If it's appropriate, you can inquire respectfully how they identify.
- Some people may "pass" as White but strongly identify with part of their culture as Latino/a, Native American, Black/African American and/or Asian Pacific Islander.
- Colorism, or prejudice or treatment based on the darkness or lightness of one's skin, is an issue for many multiracial families.

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Muslim and Islamic Families:

- Consider your terminology. Include "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" under ethnicity on intake forms, and include "Muslim" or "Islam" under religion.
- Be aware of and practice inclusivity with references to holidays (i.e. be aware of major Islamic holidays such as Ramadan.)



- Some families practice modesty; consider your dress when meeting with a Muslim family.
- Note that some practicing Muslims do not participate in cross-gender touch, including shaking hands.
- Ask about dietary restrictions or preferences if inviting families to events. Some may follow a Halal diet.

Consider some of these common values and experiences for Jewish Families:

- Note there is a wide range of Jewish identity from Orthodox religious practices to Reform Judaism to identifying as culturally Jewish but religiously agnostic.
- Be aware of and practice inclusivity with references to holidays. Do not assume everyone celebrates Christmas. Be aware of major Jewish holidays such as Passover and don't schedule meetings on those days.
- Ask about dietary restrictions or preferences if inviting families to events. Some may follow a Kosher diet.

Consider some of these common values and experiences for families with People with Disabilities:

- Accessibility of physical meeting spaces and use of technology
 - For example, if information is being provided on a website, is that website optimized for screen readers? Do you need to provide handouts in large font?
 - If someone is hard of hearing or deaf, can you provide American Sign Language interpretation?
 - Are there stairs to enter a building? Is there an accessible restroom available?
- Not all disabilities are visible: the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability advocates include invisible disabilities including learning disabilities such as dyslexia and mental health conditions.
- Consider potential need for flexibility around punctuality as people with disabilities may need to take longer/more frequent breaks.
- Do not overly emphasize the capacity for people with disabilities to perform basic tasks or live independently such as use of a modified vehicle, as this can be perceived as patronizing.
- Ask if someone would like assistance before doing so. Respect any adaptive assistance devices such as canes, crutches or wheelchairs with the same respect and consent as you would their physical body (i.e. ask for permission before touching or moving someone's cane.)



Consider some of these common values and experiences for LGBTQ Families:

- Many LGBTQ people consider their friends to be “chosen family” and some may have experienced the trauma of family or community rejection in the past.
- Most LGBTQ people see their culture and sexual orientation as positive and a cause for celebration.
- Many, though not all, lesbian, gay and bisexual people comfortably self-identify as “queer;” however, it is advised that you do not use this term until they do.
- If you are unsure of the gender identity of the person you’re working with you can respectfully ask, “What pronouns do you use?”
- Although it may seem respectful to refer to someone as “sir” or “ma’am,” you may be misgendering the person you’re trying to connect with. Misgendering is when someone assumes someone’s gender and uses gender-based language that may not match with that person’s identity. Do not use “sir” or “ma’am” or refer to boys and girls or ladies and gentlemen. In its place, use “friends,” “folks,” or other gender-neutral terms.
- Some LGBTQ persons refer to other LGBTQ people as “family” and may have a broader network of communal support than blood and legal relatives.

A marginalized identity is one that is relegated to a *less powerful position within a society or group*. Many of the children we work with many have a multiplicity of marginalized identities or a mix of privileged and marginalized identities, just like you may have. When we are able to listen deeply, seek out context and inquire respectfully to gather necessary information, we can use this information to connect and build authentic relationships that enable us to succeed in our Collaborative Family Engagement process. When in doubt about how to proceed, try to seek out guidance and information from other team members while actively participating in your own growth (remember our road map for practicing positive approaches and healthy responses to cultural dissonance.)

Reflection

- In what ways can we first seek to understand, rather than be understood by, the families we are collaborating with?
- In our dominant culture, asking questions can be seen as a form of expressing interest while other cultures may experience this as intrusive. How do you experience question asking? How might you pace or frame your questions so that families receive the question as compassionate inquiry and not as inquisition?



- Remember that we're not on this journey alone! Who in your professional or personal network can you turn to for feedback on how you might grow your capacity to be culturally adaptive and responsive?

Practicing cultural awareness will empower us at every step of our journey to search for, engage with and effectively include family members in the planning and decision making for their loved ones in care. In striving to make our system more accessible and inclusive for the families it aims to serve, we must make sure that all people feel respected and welcomed to a seat at the table.

Further Resources for Connecting Across Culture and Difference

- #RaceAnd
 - A special 8-part video series produced by [Race Forward's](#) Video Production Specialist Kat Lazo, exploring the many ways that race compounds and intersects with all the other issues faced by people of color. Each video features a different artist, activist, or thinker, sharing their lived experience how race intertwines with their other identities, and how that mix impacts their lives both personally and systemically.
 - <https://www.raceforward.org/videos/RaceAnd>
- But I'm Not a Racist - free ebook by Dr. Kathy Obear
 - Through engaging stories and concrete examples and tools, Kathy shares her own personal struggles and the common challenges many whites face as they work to create more equitable, inclusive organizations.
 - <http://drkathyobear.us9.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=685e61f3e99f2a1da92f88d15&id=47113f91b2>
- United Religions Initiative
 - <https://uri.org/kids/world-religions> Introduction to the diversity of the world's religions and spiritual traditions.
- Working with American Indian Children and Families
 - <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/diverse-populations/americanindian/>
- GLSEN Professional Development- LGBT issues in K-12 education and a destination for you to learn, act, teach, connect and support.
 - <https://www.glsen.org/educate/professional-development/toolkits>
- Teaching Tolerance Professional Development
 - <https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development>



- EduColor - EduColor seeks to elevate the voices of public school advocates of color on educational equity and justice.
 - <http://www.educolor.org/resources/>
- White Privilege Checklist <http://crc-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/white-privilege.pdf>