

Cultural diversity and children's wellbeing

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

Our community in Australia is diverse. Census figures show 27 per cent of the resident Australian population were born overseas. Twenty per cent of Australians have at least one parent who was born overseas, and the number of languages spoken at home by Australians is more than 400 (Australian Bureau of Statistics figures 2009 – www.abs.gov.au). Schools in Australia therefore have contact with students and families from many different cultural backgrounds.

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

This overview looks at influences related to cultural diversity that may affect the social and emotional development and wellbeing of children from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Some of the issues discussed in this resource may also be relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. However, to adequately address the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, a more specific understanding of their particular cultural needs and circumstances is required.

What is cultural diversity?

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



Culture and belonging

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

Children's connection to their culture develops through their experiences. Having a strong sense of their own cultural history and traditions helps children build a positive cultural identity for themselves. This also supports children's sense of belonging and self-esteem.

To be able to get on well in another culture, children need to understand and respond to different expectations (eg school versus home). It can be complex, and sometimes confusing, for children from diverse cultural backgrounds to fit within two cultures and make sense of the different expectations. In some cases children may experience 'cultural conflict' and feel that they have to choose one culture or the other, even though they have to live in both.

This can be stressful for children and have negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. However, when children have a positive sense of belonging to both cultures, their mental health and wellbeing is supported and so is their learning.

Particular challenges that may affect children and families from CALD backgrounds

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

Migration and resettlement

Families migrate from one country, region or place and settle in another for many reasons. Some families may migrate because they fear they will be harmed and discriminated against; they might voluntarily leave their country of origin to live in another country; or they might leave a country and ask to be recognised as a refugee to be protected.

Resettling in a new country or community can be complicated. Families need to find housing, employment, schools, social connections and services. Lack of knowledge about how things work in the new environment and communication difficulties can make the challenge of resettlement all the more stressful. Family, friends and others who would normally provide support may have been left behind in the move. Feelings of loneliness, isolation or concern for those left behind can occur. These difficulties affect all members of a family.

Language and communication

Language can be a major barrier for newly-arrived families. Difficulties communicating in English can cause challenges for families and undermine people's confidence. This may make finding a job or learning at school more difficult, and contribute to social isolation. Concern about language skills can make communication with schools and other services more difficult for parents and carers.

Communication issues can arise in other ways as well. When the experiences, customs and beliefs of children and families from different cultural backgrounds are not recognised or valued, it can lead to miscommunication. For example, making eye contact when speaking to someone else may be considered a sign of respect in some cultures; however, in some other cultures respect is shown by lowering eyes or looking away. If these differences are not understood by both people, it can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding on both sides.

It is very important that families have access to support in the language they are comfortable with and are able to develop their communication skills if they so desire.



Particular challenges that may affect children and families from CALD backgrounds – *continued*

Effects of trauma

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

These kinds of highly stressful circumstances can affect people long after the events have passed. Some of the common reactions that may occur in children who have been through traumatic events include an increase in fear and anxiety, which may lead to clingy behaviour, re-experiencing the trauma when feeling threatened, or difficulty in trusting and connecting with others. Such difficulties may lead to children experiencing difficulties trusting others, making it difficult for them to form relationships with adults or with their peers. For some children who have been traumatised, feelings of pain and anger can sometimes be seen in their behaviour, for instance, some children may tantrum or show high levels of emotional reactivity (eg become upset very easily). Difficulties associated with past trauma and resettlement can affect the learning and school performance of children who have been traumatised.

Discrimination and racism

Sometimes some people may resort to harmful words and behave negatively toward others as a way of managing their fears and lack of understanding about differences. This is called discrimination. Discrimination impacts negatively on individuals and entire communities. Being subject to discrimination can be a difficulty faced by many people from diverse backgrounds. This can be an issue especially for minority groups, such as those who look different from the majority of a population. Both direct discrimination (eg name-calling, bullying) and indirect discrimination (eg ignoring or excluding others from important events) can leave people feeling shut out and powerless. This can then have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Racism increases children's sense of difference and vulnerability by devaluing their culture and making them feel unwelcome. The effects of racism and discrimination can make life more difficult for families, and create undue stress and social disadvantage. Valuing diversity and being inclusive also helps promote respectful relationships and reduces the likelihood of discrimination and isolation.

Parenting across cultures

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

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

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



The role of schools

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

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

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

School staff can support children when they respect and understand that they come from diverse backgrounds and have different cultural identities (including specific expectations of behaviour and communication). Under these circumstances children and their families also feel more comfortable in and valued by their school.

Positive relationships between families and school staff convey respect for diversity and strengthen children's mental health and wellbeing.

Cultural competence and children's wellbeing

Cultural competence begins from the understanding that we are all influenced by the different social, educational and organisational cultures in which we live and participate. Recognising that our beliefs and values are not the only way of seeing or doing things opens us up to learning about other perspectives. Exploring similarities and differences in our cultural expectations improves our capacity to understand and relate to others, and helps to build a sense of belonging amongst children and their families.

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

Developing relationships

Developing relationships across cultures requires good communication and flexibility to support children's wellbeing. It is particularly important to recognise that there may be very different understandings of mental health and a range of ways of expressing difficulties across cultures. For instance, children's emotional or behavioural difficulties should be considered within their cultural context and discussed with families in a supportive and non-judgemental manner.

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This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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