



Developing a more culturally competent social worker

Cultural competency is about developing skills. This includes improving your ability to control or change your own false beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes; to think flexibly; to find sources of information about those who are different from you; and to recognize that your own thinking is not the only way.

This Month's Topic Is:

Teaching Cultural Competence to Our Children

* Adults must learn how to comfortably talk to our children about a topic that is usually difficult to discuss. Often times, we are not prepared to talk with our children about cultural differences and therefore, we ignore the topic. Adults often assume that by not talking about cultural differences, we are protecting our children from developing prejudice. However, research suggests that not talking to children about cultural differences may actually fuel the development of prejudice and stereotypes. Most adults are surprised to hear that between the ages of 2 and 5, children become aware of cultural and ethnic differences. Not only do children at this age become aware of differences, they also begin to recognize which differences are valued and which are not. At this developmental stage, the misconceptions, discomfort, fear, and rejection of difference is called pre-prejudice. However, if adults do not intervene with children at this time, pre-prejudice can develop into real prejudice.

* While talking to children and young adults about prejudice, it is important to be open and honest. Conversations about cultural differences should honor and respect the differences, as well as remind our young people about the similarities we all have in common. For example, it is not unusual for a child to ask why someone has a different skin color than they do. If your child asks you why her friend has dark skin, see this as a teachable moment. Even if you may be more comfortable not answering the question, ignoring this moment will send the message that he or she should not talk about differences. Instead, acknowledge the friend's darker skin. Depending on the child's age you may simply say, "Yes, Ashanti does have darker skin than you do. Just like you got your lighter skin color from your parents, Ashanti got his darker skin color from his parents." This response acknowledges the difference in skin color, while at the same time making skin color a common aspect we all share.

* The development of cultural competence never ends. It is a continual journey, not a destination, which we all need to be aware of and comfortable with. We must recognize that we live in a society that has pervasive cultural biases and prejudices. Adults must take an active role in fostering children's cultural competence.

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life website at:
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/>