

Are You Getting This....?

January 2015

Don't ever mistake
my silence
for ignorance,
my calmness for acceptance
and my kindness for weakness.

Training Considerations

Training for ethnic competence should be required of all services providers, regardless of race or ethnicity, thus underscoring that all foster parents and social workers alike can increase their ethnic competence. It should also be provided for board members, administrators and other affiliated with the agency so that the process of becoming ethnically competent can permeate the agency on all levels. As a recommendation the training be offered by integrated teams made up of foster parents, staff members, board members, minority consultants and youths and the emphasis of the importance of the following considerations.

1. Understanding human behavior from different cultural points of view.
2. Clarifying values in light of dominant and minority perspectives.
3. Debunking myths and biases about minorities.
4. Identifying barriers to effective engagement of clients and competent services delivery, including the effect of interpersonal and institutional racism.
5. Eliminating the fallacy that minority helpers do not need training or that non directed-contact staff members, administrators and others do not need to become ethnically competent.
6. Stressing self-awareness and the influences of one's personal beliefs, values and biases on one's behavior.
7. Disseminating information about various ethnic groups to highlight history, ethnic realities, cultural expressions, language, food, music, religion perception about the dominate group, role of and relationship with family views, values and the strengths of ethnic individuals and families.
8. Pointing out the influences of ethnic realities on the daily lives of minorities and other survival issues.
9. Modifying the traditional practice to include consideration of ethnic factors such as responses to persons of power, eye contact and the meaning of self-determination.

Need for Ethnic Competence

It is generally agreed that minority foster adolescents, who largely belong to black, Hispanic, Asian and host of others face ever greater obstacles than their Caucasian counterparts as they make their way toward adulthood. Ethnicity patterns our thinking, feelings and behavior in both obvious and subtle ways. It plays major role in determining what we eat, how we work, how we relax, celebrate holidays and rituals and how we feel about life, death and illness. Then ethnic differences of minority teenagers are frequently perceived as emotional disturbances: legitimate psychological difficulties are more likely to be met with restriction or even entrance into the criminal justice system rather than treatment. Educational and career goals are often scaled down: cultural values and related goals are frequently misunderstood and maligned and the critical need of every minority adolescent to discern and cope with the effect of racism is largely overlooked. As a result, minority foster adolescents are often less prepared to lead productive lives than their Caucasian counterparts and remain at greater risk of dependence on government systems throughout their lives.

In an effort to alter this picture, child welfare practitioners have been addressing the need to become ethnically competent (this may vary from state to state as well as provider) in planning and provision of services for young people in foster care. This goal is a critical concern because of the large number of ethnically diverse young people in placements who are being cared by white foster parents and social workers even though it is increasingly recognized that it is preferable to place children with foster families of the same race. While caregivers regardless of heritage, need to be ethnically competent in their work with children, misunderstandings related to cultural differences are most likely to take place when the ethnic backgrounds of young people differs from those of the adults caring for them.

Ethnic competence can help to overcome those differences and it has been defined as being able to conduct one's professional life in a way that is congruent with the behavior and expectations that members of a distinctive culture recognize as appropriate among themselves. Yet as they strive to develop comprehensive programs, policies and procedures, practitioners find that they are unclear about what such practice really means.

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Role of the Agency

Agencies like the individuals they comprise, can develop and project ethnic competence. In fact, agency support of and attention to the needs of minority youths send essential messages to foster parents, social workers and young people that ethnic heritage must be upheld.

Reflection of Ethnic Styles

An agency's ultimate reason for developing ethnic competence is the cultivation of minority empowerment or "a true working partnership" between minority and non-minority staff members, who cooperate to provide services that in turn empower clients to meet their needs.

One way for the agency to accomplish this task is to identify and work with minority consultants, who should represent the range of cultural groups in the community. Possible sources include religious and spiritual leaders, community settlement houses and local chapters of ethnically focused organizations. System wide consistent and carefully implemented information sharing is certain to produce the kind of useful change and growth that agencies seek.

The process of developing ethnic competence is slow and serious. Efforts to trivialize it through such inadequate means as offering intermittent workshops or recruiting token minority board members or staff must be avoided.

Minority Foster Adolescents

Most foster parents and social workers would agree that competence coupled with empathy, warmth and genuineness is required when caring for young people who are working to overcome the challenges of leaving the foster care system. Additional competence is needed however when working with minority adolescents because they bring to the client-helper relationships cultural differences that must be understood if help is to be effectively given. These differences involve perceptions of self and others, styles of interacting, personal grooming, language, history, family patterns and relationships and parenting styles, self-image values, as well as tastes in food and music.

Frequently minority teenagers also face difficult challenges that stem directly from discrimination against their racial group. They must overcome rejection not only by biological parents, but by the dominant society as well. This double rejection can result in pervasive feelings of anger and despair, which greatly impede progress toward adulthood. Youths who are hostile and hurt by the compounded rejection of family and community are especially vulnerable to insidious traps that are so often waiting on them: crime, substance abuse, early and unwanted pregnancies, and dropping out of school. Each of these alone has a deleterious effect on the attainment of adult life skills and in combination these may impede a rewarding life and always seem elusive.

Ethnicity is expressed in myriad ways throughout one's life, including the ways in which one prepares for adulthood. The nuances must be understood and respected if minority adolescents are to be reared effectively for adulthood. Reactions to the onset of sexual maturity are ethnically determined. It is at the same time some cultures perceive a set of behaviors for males that differ greatly from those for females. Awareness and respect for these differences are necessary for minority adolescents to be helped to take culturally acceptable steps toward adulthood. It is also important to remember that the effect of oppression can lead young people to seek ways to feel free of others and in control of themselves. As part of their adult responsibilities, minority foster youths are ultimately responsible for passing on their culture and values to their own children. To do so they must have the opportunity to experience their culture and to be familiar with its special foods, values, language, holidays and more. Minority foster adolescents need to know their roots because this information will be used to shape the next generation and become a major life task. Finally minority adolescents typically experience less personal power and control than their white peers and indeed may feel that they should not be directly responsible for themselves or take charge for their lives.

Efforts to ready young people for life after foster care must appreciate this perspective. It seems misguided that independent living training programs and materials for foster youths often have autonomy, initiative and accomplishment as their foundation, when so many as a result of being oppressed, have learned submission and have developed values that are contrary to initiative and accomplishment. This condition requires that efforts to prepare these young people for adulthood and acknowledge their limited expectations and include goals related to empowerment. Thus in addition to the range of needs the young people may have due to their foster care status, minority adolescents present expectations that require caregivers to become ethnically competent to prepare these youths effectively for adulthood. Thus the issue of being ethnically competent is relevant for all foster parents, but especially those whose culture is different from that of the adolescent in their care.

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“DON'T WAIT UNTIL
EVERYTHING IS JUST RIGHT. IT
WILL NEVER BE PERFECT. THERE
WILL ALWAYS BE CHALLENGES,
OBSTACLES AND LESS THAN
PERFECT CONDITIONS. SO WHAT.
GET STARTED NOW. WITH EACH
STEP YOU TAKE, YOU WILL GROW
STRONGER AND STRONGER,
MORE AND MORE SKILLED, MORE
AND MORE SELF-CONFIDENT
AND MORE AND MORE
SUCCESSFUL.
TWENTY YEARS FROM NOW YOU
WILL BE MORE DISAPPOINTED BY
THE THINGS THAT YOU DIDN'T
DO THAN BY THE ONES YOU DID
DO. SO THROW OFF THE
BOWLINES. SAIL AWAY FROM
THE SAFE HARBOR. CATCH THE
TRADE WINDS IN YOUR SAILS.
EXPLORE. DREAM. DISCOVER.”

Conclusion

Foster parents, social works and agencies can and must become ethnically competent in order to help minority foster adolescents as they make their way to adulthood. Interdependent living preparation that does not include respect for and attention to the special needs of ethnic minorities will leave a substantial portion of emancipating young people unequipped to handle even the usual stresses of adulthood and even less so the additional demands posed when minority adolescents face the effect of racism. Ethnically competent preparation for interdependent living requires a system wide, consistent and carefully implemented effort to change attitudes and practices of all those responsible for providing services to this population of adolescents: foster parents, social workers, agency administrators and board members. Pride in one's ethnic heritage is a tremendous source of joy and identity for many people. Ethnically competent caretakers and service providers can help ensure that minority foster youths experience this necessary and **very human connection to themselves, their past and their ongoing future....**

“The uniformity of the earth's life,
more astonishing than its
diversity, is accountable by the
high probability that we derived,
originally, from some single cell,
fertilized in a bolt of lightning as
the earth cooled.”