

# 8

## Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Relationships

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

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1. What do I understand about the idea of “loving” the children I teach?
2. How do I address cultural values when they show up in my classroom?
3. What can I do to support children without lowering expectations for every exception?
4. How comfortable am I with pausing before taking control of a situation?

**As you read this chapter, record the reactions, thoughts, or questions that come up in your journal.**

Many teachers believe they have positive relationships with the children and families they work with. As you have learned, there are barriers that keep even well-meaning teachers from having deep, respectful, and authentic connections with children and families. There may be families you like and respect; however, this does not mean there is a connection. Being in a relationship with another person is about connection.

To build and maintain a supportive or positive connection, people must be deliberate and must honor the other party for all of who they are. Acknowledging the whole person without trying to change them to suit your own or your program’s or school’s value system is what being responsive to different cultures is all about. This is easier in theory than it is in practice. As a first step, think about how cultural humility will help you learn more about children and families. Creating a connection requires you to not only learn about the child and family but also accept them, their values, customs, and cultural practices. You suspend judgment and become intensely curious so that you can create connections at a much deeper level. This requires intentionality.

To build positive and productive relationships, then, teachers are both intentional and culturally responsive. For some, this may feel like their understanding of “loving” their own children. For others, a shift in thinking can help so that they can embrace every child and family. *Unconditional positive regard* can help teachers view the children and their families in the necessary light to embrace them without judgment. It requires teachers to develop an attitude of profound respect and acceptance with the understanding that nothing a child does or who a child is can diminish their humanity and dignity.

## Unconditional Positive Regard

Carl Rogers was one of the founders of the field of humanistic psychology and person-centered therapy. He defined unconditional positive regard as holding an attitude of caring and acceptance toward an individual regardless of their behavior or their personal or cultural values. Rogers viewed receiving unconditional positive regard as essential to the healthy development of every individual (VandenBos 2007).

Early childhood work is centered on an ethic of care, and the concept of unconditional positive regard is often encapsulated in the idea that teachers love the children in their care. In other levels of education, and in many other fields, the idea of “loving” clients or students is often challenged as being outside the domain of healthy interaction. Unconditional positive regard is language that helps to frame the early childhood ethic of care.

### Families

Teachers demonstrate unconditional positive regard to families by building relational trust (that is, trust within the specific relationship) with them as partners in the work of supporting and educating children (Bryk & Schneider 2004). Genuinely listening to families and valuing their choices, interactions, and behaviors demonstrates respect. Accepting families enables a deeper trust to develop. Families see that teachers care without shaming, blaming, or evaluating the quality of their love for their own child, and they trust school personnel enough to be open to building a partnership. Recognizing and acknowledging their interdependence of roles enables positive outcomes for children.

Mutual feelings of trust also enable teachers to enter respectfully into dialogue with families when they recognize harm, which all teachers have a responsibility to report. When they enter with a spirit of curiosity, humility, and a genuine effort to reduce the sense of vulnerability that families often feel, it broadens the opportunities to learn, support, and teach.

### Children

Teachers show unconditional positive regard to children by accepting and loving them as they are, believing the very best of them regardless of circumstances, behavior, culture, or any other factors. It includes total acceptance of a child and a deep-seated belief that they can learn and thrive. This begins with having deep, meaningful, and positive relationships with each child in

the classroom. It also includes an understanding and acceptance of the teacher's role in ensuring their success. The belief that every human has a built-in capacity to grow, learn, and develop leads teachers to operate with the highest expectations. This is important because studies show that children rise to the expectations of their teachers (Johnston, Wildy, & Shand 2021).

Research has consistently shown that when teachers believe in children and have high expectations for them, they respond accordingly (Johnston, Wildy, & Shand 2021). Children engage more, have higher self-esteem, greater motivation, more confidence, and higher overall outcomes when teachers' expectations are high. Children respond positively to teachers who demonstrate their belief that they are smart, capable, and can do difficult things. Many times, children exceed expectations simply because the teacher believed in them.

Children grow in whatever environment they are in. The beauty of being a culturally responsive teacher is having the opportunity to cocreate an optimal environment that will nourish the growth of every child who enters the classroom. The rich diversity of social and cultural backgrounds that make up the classroom is an opportunity to enhance equity by ensuring that everyone feels seen, heard, and understood. Responding with sensitivity, openness, and curiosity is the key to unlocking the depth and beauty of the differences between and among people.



## Cultural Humility, Revisited

Understanding and appreciating cultural differences is not a new idea. When the field of education focused on celebrating a melting pot of difference becoming one country, diverse groups were required to suppress their unique cultures and blend in, creating one distinct American culture. Over time there was a developing sensitivity to the idea that encouraging families and individuals to abandon their cultural identity in order to assimilate or blend into the dominant culture might not be the ideal. The ability to “accept” and “tolerate” the differences among individuals to create more of a fruit salad than a melting pot became the preferred ideal (Seven 2023). As explored in Chapter 5, multiculturalism and the celebrations of different cultural traditions then took hold in schools. These celebrations typically focused on surface culture and highlighted traditional, historical, and changeable differences like food, clothing, and music.

However, simply tolerating allows the dominant group to remain in power and to reduce entire cultures to “other” status. To deepen understanding about different cultures in classrooms, and to move beyond surface culture to those ways of being that genuinely shape interactions with others, the idea of developing cultural competence emerged on the scene. Learning about various world cultures and the values and practices that influence the ways people behave is at the heart of cultural competence. The idea took hold in multiple fields of study, in organizations, in the medical community, and in schools. Software, games, websites, seminars, and professional development training emerged, allowing access and opportunity to learn about cultures around the world (Lekas, Pahl, & Lewis 2020). But this approach had drawbacks. First and foremost, by depicting all people from the same culture as having the same values, customs, and beliefs, it opened the door to widely generalized and potentially dangerous stereotypes. It also presupposed that it was possible for any individual to study, learn, and appreciate every culture around the world and that the mixing of cultures simply doesn’t happen. More important, it left the scholar—the teacher, doctor, human resources director—in a position of authority about other people’s cultures, values, and experiences.

As you learned in Chapter 5, Doctors Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García (1998) developed the idea of cultural humility: moving beyond the goal of developing cultural competence (a set of skills and knowledge) to foster a way of thinking and being that is open and accepting. Cultural humility examines the root causes of individual, institutionalized, and systemic racism and oppression that cause suffering to create a broader and more inclusive view of the world.

The cultural humility approach introduced in Chapter 5 has spread from the medical profession to many other fields, including public health, social work, nonprofit management, and education. Rather than trying to know all that can be known about “others,” cultural humility embraces the idea that when people step out of a position of having to know it all, they can listen better and learn more about who people are in an authentic way, from their own point of view. This approach allows individuals to take off the “expert” hat and to appreciate how subtle and nuanced culture truly is. It gives people permission to see each individual as both a product and inventor of their own culture. In education, this means that teachers can give themselves permission to *not* know and to ask questions to learn about families’ cultural norms and expectations from the families themselves.

The work of equity and inclusion is not about others—it is about oneself. It is personal work. There is not a quick fix or a box to check or a website to visit that will improve how individuals engage with others. Cultural humility requires each person to embrace lifelong learning and critical self-examination to build their own capacity to be culturally responsive. The journey has no end point, so each person must continue to look at themselves and their own interactions with curiosity and a desire to learn. No one is ever done learning.