



# Creating Cultural Sensitivity *in foster care*

Cultural identity is not a destination, it is a journey — and for youth in foster or adoptive care, this journey can be a long, difficult one with numerous hurdles. Each of us is grounded in a complex, unique identity that develops out of our individual cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We develop these identities in a variety of ways, such as family traditions, religious teachings or cultural activities. We learn the ways of our families and others in our cultural and ethnic groups by participating in these circles of support. For youth in foster care, they have been separated from the social circles where they would have developed their distinct mix of cultural, ethnic and individual characteristics. Foster and adoptive parents, social workers, biological

families and other people involved with youth in care should consider the role of this disruption on the development of a child's concept of who they are. There are many ways we can encourage and enhance identity development during a youth's placement to respect and repair this loss and support the child in building a stronger self-concept. The goal is for youths' cultural identity to be an integral part of their lives, as it is for most healthy adults.

It is critical for foster and adoptive parents and support staff to offer multiple opportunities for youths' individual exploration of cultural, historical and gender issues (a core principle of trauma-informed care). This process starts with

understanding that “cultural identity” is not rooted solely in racial or ethnic backgrounds. One of the ways we think about culture is in terms of things we have in common with other people.

Our ideas about culture need to expand to appreciate how cultural identity is also forged through the relationships we develop with people and groups based on shared experiences, shared food, shared values, etc. When we look at culture this way, we begin to see that differences in rural versus urban may be more significant than differences in race, and that differences in parental level of education may be more significant than differences in ethnicity. As foster and adoptive parents explore cultural identity with kids in their

care, they should look at the complex background of the youth and not focus only on the race or ethnicity of the child.

The more understanding and awareness foster and adoptive parents have about their own cultural heritage and identity, the better prepared they will be to work with people from culturally diverse communities. In order to provide sensitive and effective care to children from cultures that are different from one's own, two things must be present:

1. An awareness of one's own cultural values and beliefs and recognition of how they can influence attitudes and behaviors; and
2. An understanding of the cultural values and beliefs of youth in foster/adoptive care and how these can influence youth's attitudes and behaviors.

All of us who strive to support and help kids in care must be aware of our assumptions regarding cultural identity. Cultural identity cannot be fully appreciated or understood by simply knowing the color of someone's skin or the language spoken by someone's parent. Yet, we often make this common mistake by operating off of what we know about commonalities among people with similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. So, all of us in the business of helping kids need to be investigators and ask challenging questions, explore and confront our own biases, and leverage our genuine curiosity and compassion to provide environments for youth in care to develop a more complete sense of self.

Foster and adoptive parents can follow some basic guidelines for creating a culturally-sensitive home and for nurturing healthy development of youth in care:

- Be respectful of other cultures and their traditions.
- Allow and encourage youth choice.
- Allow voluntary participation in your

## Brief Overview of Together Facing the Challenge

Together Facing the Challenge is a comprehensive curriculum, training and consultation model under the leadership of Maureen Murray, LCSW, within the Services Effectiveness Research Program in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University School of Medicine. It is based on nine years of treatment foster care randomized trials and studies that showed significant improvement in a range of youth-level outcomes. The success of youth living with treatment foster parents who used Together Facing the Challenge led to our model achieving an evidence-based status with the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse, thus being only the second evidence-based model of therapeutic foster care in the United States. Given the limited resources of agencies, as well as the increasing demands for evidence-based practice, we developed Together Facing the Challenge in an effort to provide a program that was both cost and time efficient. It is designed to be a low-cost approach to improving treatment within the existing structure and practice of a wide range of treatment foster care agencies.

For more information on Together Facing the Challenge, visit <https://sites.duke.edu/tftc/>.

family's cultural and ethnic activities, especially if they differ from that of the child in your care.

- Seek permission to participate in cultural and ethnic (including biological family) activities of youth in your care, especially if they differ from your own.
- Provide access to culturally relevant activities and locations for your youth.

Once this basic foundation is in place, foster and adoptive parents can practice more specific activities to help youth in care establish or reclaim their cultural identity. Remember, placement disruptions and other disconnections from their past create challenges for these youth to embrace their culture. So, we as "helpers" need to be more intentional about how we create safe environments for children to learn more about who they are and where they come from. Below are some examples to increase sensitivity to diversity and to foster connections to a youth's culture:

- Find out your youth's favorite meal — and make it for them (or even "with" them).
- Explore how your youth has experienced (and prefers to experience) birthdays, holidays and other celebrations.
- Ask the child in your care to share their lifebook with you or help the youth begin one, and share your lifebook (e.g., photo albums) with youth in your care.
- Connect youth with cultural or ethnic activities that they are interested in attending.
- Seek out members of the child's culture and/or ethnicity, particularly family members with whom they have shared experiences (and create opportunities for renewing or rebuilding those connections where possible/acceptable).
- Visit places where the youth can be among other people of their culture.
- Make your home culturally sensitive by providing multicultural:
  - Art (paintings, sculpture, folk art)
  - Toys and games
  - Media (e.g. books, movies, magazines)
- Visit museums, stores, restaurants and local events that cater to the culture of children in your care.

All of us are most experienced with our own culture and, as adults, have cultivated our own individual self-concept and values with time and exploration. Welcoming youth with different cultures, ethnicities and values into our homes can be a challenge, especially when our values clash with those of the chil-

dren in our care. It will require long-term exploration, acceptance and patience with ourselves and our youth to adapt to these differences within our homes. One way to address these challenges is to set personal cultural sensitivity goals. The below framework can be used to set goals for yourself or to support youth in care to set their own goals. Here are the key components to goal setting:

- Identify a positively stated, specific goal.
- Identify steps to reach the goal.
- Identify your strengths, challenges and resources (our tool sorts the steps into strengthening what you are already good at and working to remedy your weaknesses in preparation to achieve the goal).
- Check in on a regular basis to track your progress and make adjustments as needed.

There are also several questions that have proven helpful to foster and adoptive parents when attempting to get a more thorough picture of the cultural identity of a child in their home. These questions can be asked directly of youth, family members, social workers and others, or they can be more informal guides when foster and adoptive parents are getting to know the youth in their care. In some cases, the review of a youth's lifebook can be an ideal time to generate some answers to these questions:

- What family traditions seem important to youth in your care?
- What activities do they remember as favorite ones?
- What clothes, art or media do I notice in the pictures or in their memories?
- What can I learn about my youth's individual identity — and his or her individual strengths, aspirations and values?
- How can I further nurture these?

It is important to remember that talking about race, ethnicity and culture can lead to larger discussions around racism, oppression, prejudice, stereotypes, power and privilege. In addition, youth

(particularly those with a trauma history) need an environment of emotional and physical safety to engage in these dialogues and do this type of self-discovery. These talks can be uncomfortable, just like how challenging our own biases around race, ethnicity and culture can be difficult. These talks can be unintentionally re-traumatizing to some youth, so seek the guidance and support of the care team when beginning this work and periodically “check in” with youth verbally and through observing their non-verbal behaviors. However, if we are truly invested in helping youth develop a strong cultural identity, then we must be prepared to do the heavy lifting at times. Not only does it take a village to raise a child, it takes hard work to help youth in foster and adoptive care craft a more fulfilling sense of who they are. ✿

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Maureen Murray, LCSW, serves as the program director and lead trainer for Together Facing the Challenge. She began her career as a social worker and later a therapist for children and adolescents (both individual and group therapy sessions) before joining the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University in 1991. Before leading the current dissemination program, Murray served as both the clinical director and principal investigator for the control trial research studies which led to Together Facing the Challenge's creation and evidence-based status. She has numerous publications in the field of therapeutic foster care, in both research and practice settings. She has a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a master's degree in social work from Smith College. Murray is currently an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at Duke University.

Donald Bartosik, LMFT, earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from North Carolina State University and a master's degree in

marriage and family therapy from East Carolina University. For the last 20 years, he has been active in all levels of public mental health service delivery in North Carolina, across a wide spectrum of levels of care (case management, foster care, day treatment, outpatient therapy, intensive in-home/family preservation, substance abuse services). Bartosik has also served in a multitude of roles, from direct care as a licensed therapist and case manager, to delivering agency-wide clinical and operational oversight as clinical director, quality assurance director and director of operations. Bartosik joined the Together Facing the Challenge team in 2015 as one of the program's certified trainers and consultants.

Tom Holahan, M.Ed., attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for both undergraduate and graduate studies, where he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and recreation administration followed by a master's degree in special education. Since then, he has worked with children with behavioral and emotional challenges and their families, as well as provided clinical supervision and training to staff in public school systems, residential treatment facilities, and therapeutic foster care settings. Tom has collaborated with the Together Facing the Challenge team as a certified trainer since 2014, and joined the staff full-time in January 2016.

Riley Craven, BA, attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she earned bachelor's degrees in psychology and sociology in 2014. Since graduating, she's worked predominantly in child development research, investigating such topics as elementary reading comprehension, inhibitory control in adolescents, and childhood obesity prevention. After gaining valuable experience as a research assistant, data collector, and project coordinator, Craven joined the Together Facing the Challenge team in 2015, and serves as the program's staff specialist.