Emerging Minds.

Culturally responsive understandings for promoting children's health and wellbeing across diverse communities (part two)

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What is this paper about?

This paper is the second of two papers that discuss culturally responsive practice to support children's mental health and wellbeing when working with families with diverse cultural backgrounds.

The migration experience for families settling in Australia can be both exciting and challenging. Culturally responsive practice can help shape a positive migration experience for children and their families. This practice moves beyond understandings of culture to acknowledge the unique experiences of each family. Through cultural curiosity, practitioners can learn much about the needs of children and families, and tailor service approaches to meet their needs. Grounded in families' strengths, knowledge and skills, this paper offers some practice strategies that focus on children's identity, health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Terminology

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) is a commonly used term in Australia and is used by the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia. However, we recognise the limits of its usefulness. When we use this term, we are referring to the vast array of languages, ethnicities, nationalities, traditions, societal structures and religions within families and across many different communities (Joshi & Gartoulla, 2022; The UN Refugee Agency, 2023).

Who is this resource for?

This resource is developed for practitioners who work with culturally diverse children and families. It builds on the four key domains that can influence the mental health of children in culturally diverse communities, as introduced in the Emerging Minds online course, *Understanding children's mental health in culturally diverse communities*. Additionally, it offers five practice strategies supporting culturally responsive practice, as demonstrated in Emerging Minds' online course, *Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health*.

If you are presently working with a child and/or the parent of a child who is from a culturally diverse background, you might also like to review, and refer parents to, our resources for families.

The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are culturally and linguistically diverse, and face significant barriers to receiving the support they need. The sociopolitical and health impacts that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced since colonisation are unable to be adequately covered by the scope of this brief paper, given the depth and complexity of these experiences. If you wish to explore strategies for supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in greater detail, please browse the Emerging Minds resource library.

Six practice positions to guide engagement with children and their families

The [National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC)](#) has developed six practice positions to support practitioners to consistently apply a child-focused lens in their work with children and parents (NWC, 2018).

These practice positions are:

– child-focused and parent-sensitive

– curiosity

– respect

– collaboration

– context; and

– strengths and hope.

These positions can help to keep children visible through every aspect of service delivery, by promoting authentic conversations between practitioners and parents/caregivers about parenting and their children's wellbeing, and supporting practitioners to feel confident engaging with infants, children and families.

Collaborative work with children, parents and culturally diverse families allows practitioners to recognise and prioritise parents' knowledge of their children's strengths and vulnerabilities. A collaborative approach enables parents to take the lead in creating plans that support children's social and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, it provides opportunities for children to be genuine partners in decision-making processes that impact their lives (Bland et al., 2021).

Coupled with a collaborative approach, curiosity enables practitioners to uncover unnoticed solutions. Genuine curiosity about the daily lives of families fosters a deeper understanding and prioritises the child's wellbeing for positive change. This relational approach focuses on strengths and skills rather than assumptions based solely on professional expertise (Ellis et al., 2020).

- [More information on Emerging Minds' six practice positions](#)

Cultural curiosity

Cultural curiosity involves appreciating differences and avoiding stereotypes when working with diverse families. Curiosity about people's experiences, values and beliefs helps foster authentic relationships and empowers families to use their experiences, knowledge and wisdom for problem-solving. Despite challenges in maintaining curiosity, through recognising children and families as experts in their own lives and encouraging a family-informed decision-making position, practitioners can more effectively provide support for children's experiences (Gottlieb, 2020).

> **The curiosity has to be in a way that doesn't position us as 'exotic'. And I use that term because we have been told that us and our culture is very exotic … So, we would tend to get, "Oh, I've been to this place. And do you eat this food?" Or they might say hello in certain language and it's neither of our languages.**
>
> RENEE, EMERGING MINDS FAMILY PARTNER

- [More information on practicing cultural curiosity with children and families](#)

Five practice strategies of culturally responsive practice

Practitioners can navigate cultural differences and culturally responsive practice strategies in the following Emerging Minds online course, *Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health*.

Five key practice strategies helpful in working with culturally diverse children and families are:

1. Responding to experiences of racism

2. Navigating family cultural tensions: Exploring cultural tensions

3. Navigating family cultural tensions: Connecting with what's valued

4. Navigating family cultural tensions: Protecting family relationships

5. Correcting cultural mistakes.

Underpinning these five practice strategies is a foundation of strengths-based practice. Prioritising the strengths of both the child and the family, encompassing personal strengths as well as social and community strengths, offers resonant and sustainable pathways for support (Russell, 2022). When practitioners engage with families experiencing adversity, the temptation may arise to solely focus on problems and offer solutions to resolve them.

In the following video (2 minutes, 23 seconds) Etty offers insights into strengths-based practice and discusses what she focuses on when supporting families.

Counsellor
Etty Garabelli
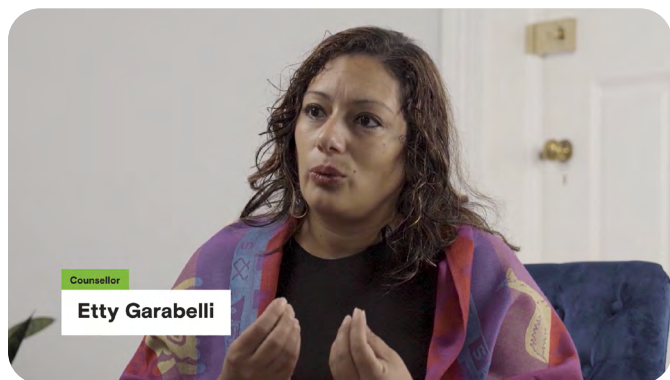
In the following video (1 minute, 2 seconds) Etty highlights how focusing on children's responses to racism strengthens children's skills and knowledge and offers practitioners a strengths-based pathway.

Counsellor
Etty Garabelli
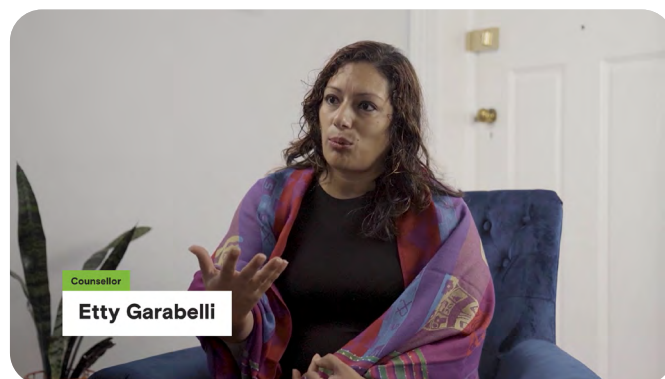
1. Responding to experiences of racism

Migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds are highly likely to experience discrimination in Australia. Unfair and unjust treatment based on race or ethnicity has profoundly negative impacts on the health, development and general wellbeing of children and families. Also known as racism, it impacts a family's ability to acculturate, experience equality, and develop confidence and identity in a new country (Kathomi & Letisha, 2021).

When practitioners notice that children's and families' experiences include racism it is important to respond. Practitioners and parents share that it is important when responding to consider five key elements:

– noticing

– exploring

– naming

– separating the child/family from the behaviour; and

– highlighting the child's/family's response as an act of knowing something else to be true.

> **"**
>
> **For practitioners to take that responsibility, engage with us, talk with us about it, but also to do the work as well, and to say, 'We're gonna follow up on this', not just one time and fix things, but ongoing work, wherever it might be, so that we know we have this experience. Hopefully other families do not have this experience that we've had.'**
>
> RENEE, EMERGING MINDS FAMILY PARTNER

Learn more about responding to experiences of racism in the Emerging Minds online course, *Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health*.

Navigating family cultural tensions

Acculturation can pose challenges to a family's relationships and their social and emotional wellbeing. Women may encounter conflicts as they pursue employment and connections beyond their immediate family and community, which can be at odds with traditional role expectations of their family. Likewise, when children explore interests and connections outside their family, cultural and/or faith communities, it can cause conflict within the family and their broader relationships (Alati, 2003).

Practitioners are often drawn into problem-focused conversations aimed at resolving issues within children and families. However, these discussions may not resonate or may unfairly assign blame to specific family members. Culturally open and curious practitioners create a safe space for family members to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences in an effort towards fostering mutual understanding of differing perspectives and priorities.

Children and family members may internalise tensions, viewing them as personal faults rather than considering broader social and cultural factors. Practitioners can help shift this perspective by externalising or separating the problem from the individual, encouraging them to perceive challenges as products of culture and history rather than personal shortcomings (White & Morgan, 2006).

The following three-part practice strategy for navigating family cultural tensions involves:

– exploring cultural tensions

– connecting with what's valued; and

– protecting family values.

It outlines how practitioners can support children and families in navigating tensions arising from cultural differences while resisting invitations to step into problem-centered, solutions-focused and blaming spaces.

Family Therapist
Pshko Marden

> **When people say, 'Back in my day …', you know, we've all heard that. And there's great things about back in that day, there's also things that we want to improve and change because we've got more resources or more research, or we can look back and understand, maybe that wasn't right back then.**

RENEE, EMERGING MINDS FAMILY PARTNER

2. Navigating family cultural tensions: Exploring cultural tensions

When working with a family experiencing tension due to differing cultural priorities, it is important to begin by exploring what is happening and the effects of this tension on each family member, including children. By contextualising the problem and understanding the contributing factors, both practitioners and families gain greater clarity, insight and comprehension of the problem and its dynamics. Knowing the effects of the problem on family relations enables the family to resist allowing the tension to negatively impact their relationships with each other. Objectifying the problem by discussing it as separate from the family – a process also known as externalising the problem (Dulwich Centre, n.d.) – further supports this approach (Bhugun, 2016).

In the following video (2 minutes, 28 seconds) Pshko Marden, family therapist, discusses his approach to handling difficult conversations with families. He focuses specifically on the concept of externalising the problem and how families unite to confront it.

3. Navigating family cultural tensions: Connecting with what's valued

Once a shared definition of the problem is established, the practitioner can seek to identify shared values and what is central to the family's priorities, implicit within their concerns and hopes for change. These are the values that connect and reconnect the family, strengthened by reasons why they are important, like others who may be integral to their significance, such as elders or ancestors. This approach supports a collaborative way forward for families to manage the tension in their relationships with each other (Wise & da Silva, 2007).

> **What is being valued either within a culture or within a family, it is like that gravitational pull that without it, every planet goes their own way and they become rogue. And so, we need that, and it's there, to bind the family or the community. So, it's what's shared between, all of them. And without it, there is no sense of family. There is no sense of culture. So, it's what is valued is always what is bring us together. What is kind of keeping us, you know … orbiting the same thing.**

PSHKO MARDEN, FAMILY THERAPIST

4. Navigating family cultural tensions: Protecting family relationships

Once family tensions have been acknowledged and explored, and their collective values have been identified, practitioners can begin to focus on the family's strengths, skills and wisdom. These conversations can assist the family to protect their relationships with one another from the impacts of the tensions they're experiencing and develop collaborative responses and strategies (Bornstein, 2017).

This approach highlights the significance of acknowledging the wealth of skills and knowledge possessed by children and families. Practitioners guide conversations to highlight what is important to them while noticing the families' expertise in navigating tensions. Instead of aiming for resolution or trying to change opinions, culturally responsive practitioners encourage discussions that cultivate connection and strategies that families can use when tensions arise.

In the following practice demonstration video (2 minutes) the counsellor provides the family with an opportunity to reflect on how their shared skills are contributing to the child's (Imani's) connections and self-perception.
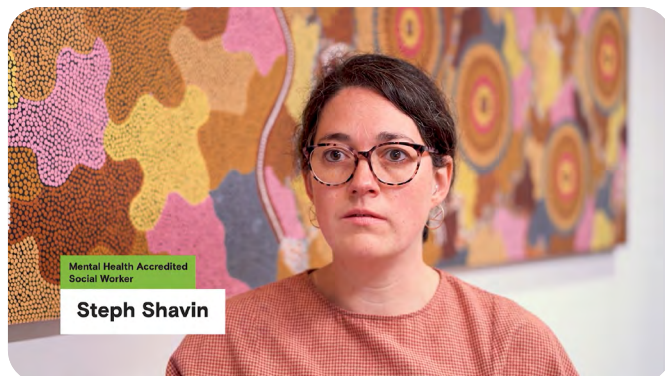

5. Correcting cultural mistakes

Practitioners committed to culturally responsive practice may still inadvertently make cultural mistakes influenced by unconscious biases. These mistakes are rooted in the practitioners' own experiences and cultural perspectives, and may include verbal and nonverbal mistakes. While occasional missteps are an inevitable part of practice, they can lead to inaccurate, hurtful or marginalising assumptions about children and families. Despite practitioners'

best efforts, such errors can have significant consequences, potentially discouraging families' continued engagement with services. Any steps practitioners can take to acknowledge and apologise for mistakes can be critical for maintaining families' engagement (Eubanks et al., 2021).

In the following video (2 minutes, 7 seconds) Steph Shavin, a mental health accredited social worker, shares how she navigates making a cultural mistake.

In the following video (1 minute, 14 seconds), a fictional practitioner demonstrates the four steps of correcting a cultural mistake when working with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

To hear more from practitioners and family partners, as well as to watch our practitioner demonstrations, see the Emerging Minds course, *Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health*.

Summary

Culturally responsive practice is an ongoing learning journey that practitioners take alongside families and communities to support child mental health and wellbeing. Practitioners who remain humble and curious, and take time to reflect on their cultural ideas, beliefs and practices, are better placed to build culturally respectful relationships with children and families, while helping them to arrive at resonant and sustainable solutions.

The resources introduced in this paper provide key practice considerations and strategies aimed at strengthening culturally responsive practice. By embracing these principles and continually striving to learn, practitioners will foster meaningful connections, promote positive outcomes, and support the wellbeing of children and families from diverse backgrounds.

This final video (1 minute, 15 seconds) includes words of encouragement from Emerging Minds family partners for a culturally responsive practice journey.

Suggested resources

Practice papers

– *Does labelling racism as bullying perpetuate a colour-blind approach when working with culturally diverse families?*

– *How the experiences and circumstances of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and families influence child mental health*

– *Practicing cultural curiosity when engaging with children and families*

– *Culturally informed ways to support mental health in refugee and asylum seeker children*

Webinars

– *Navigating cultural differences: Culturally responsive practice supporting families*

– *Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse children and families who experience racism*

– *Approaches to support child mental health in culturally and linguistically diverse communities*

– *Cultural considerations to support children from migrant and refugee backgrounds*

Podcasts

– *Dismantling interpersonal racism to support culturally diverse families*

– *Reflections on culturally competent practice with Mthobeli Ngcanga*

– *Reflections on culturally competent practice with Nellie Anderson*

Online courses

– *Understanding children's mental health in culturally diverse communities*

– *Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health*

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